My 20th Century Life

Leonard Breakwell

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Editor's Preface

When I was six-years-old, I met the Breakwell family. They lived round the corner, and up the road from us in Solihull. My oldest friend, John Breakwell, was their first-born, and he and I have now known each other for 76 years. A long time ago he married my sister, Pamela, and so we are happily related.

His family house in Solihull was my main refuge as a child, from a sometimes tempestuous home life. I would visit them, and marvel at the peace and tranquility of their house. His father, Len, always seemed to be either decorating a room, or carrying a nice cup-of-tea to John's mother, in their cosy front room. John and I often played Monopoly, with frequent injections of 'cash' to keep the game going for weeks at a time. I was always welcome there, and I can now understand that this home was an essential rock for my existence as a child. From the other end of my life, I have the opportunity to pay back some of this nurturing, by editing, collating and presenting Len's marvellous autobiography. Although he left school at fourteen, he was a natural storyteller, who knew what would be of interest to other people. He writes in a no-nonsense fashion, and reveals his kind, liberal nature as he goes along. At first, I thought this might be a long-winded, and even onerous task, but rapidly I found myself drawn into a fascinating and educational account of much of the twentieth century.

In the account of his time as a Japanese prisoner-of-war, he pulls no punches, and I have left his language alone, even though his condemnation of his captors might be seen as an unfair generalisation in today's world. My opinion is that all the imperial powers in history, including our own, have behaved in unforgivable ways towards their victims. Of course, Len is commenting on the Japanese and Korean guards he encountered in his terrible ordeal, and not about the majority of their countries' civilian populations. Perhaps I need not have said this, but wanted to explain why I have not used the editor's backspace-delete key on his text.

Even though I lived through many of these years myself, there were several things he wrote about that I did not know, or had forgotten. I hope you will also enjoy this fascinating account of a good man's experience of twentieth century life.

Barrie Hope - 29th January 2025

Introduction

In his early days my father was quite adventurous, sometimes travelling out to Shropshire to visit his paternal grandfather, who owned a quarry on the Clee Hill, and to his maternal grandparents, who had a large farm on the Worcestershire-Shropshire border.

After the Second World War and his experiences on the Burma Railway, his health problems required a more routine, sedate way of life. With great help and support from my mother, and the people he worked with in the Public Health Department, he went on to live to 84 years of age, with over 20 years of peaceful retirement. During that period he managed to see his grandchildren grow up, celebrated many family events, including his diamond wedding anniversary, and always enjoyed walking through beautiful Malvern Park into Solihull for his morning cup of tea.

His sense of adventure was still there and holidays were important to him. Apart from his visits in England to Torbay and Eastbourne, he managed to persuade my mother, who had never been out of England, to visit me, on several occasions when I was working in Norway. He also revisited the Dunkirk beaches when I was working near there. He explained to me how he and his companions had escaped from Dunkirk by hiding in the sand dunes at Bray Dunes (Le Panne), and when boats became available, how they had marched down the

beach into the sea. He also showed me the Town Hall in a nearby town where he worked in the signals section before retreating.

One day he asked me if we could go to the Menin Gate, the First World War memorial for unknown soldiers, as he believed his uncle, who shared his name, was listed on the memorial. Unfortunately, we couldn't find his uncle's name. At 8 pm we were up on a small hill overlooking the memorial, when a soldier appeared and started playing the last post. My father went as white as a sheet, and I had to get him away quickly from the area. I was in my forties at the time, and had never realised that the last post caused him so much distress, since his sojourn with the Japanese on the Burma Railway. Now, there are hundreds of graves in that area and on the way back to Le Panne, Dad asked if we could stop at one. I duly stopped the car, and we walked down the row of graves. Near the end we came across his Uncle Len's grave. Was this a coincidence?

My father was a good man, well known in Solihull, where he quietly lived his life helping others, and looking after his family. He was one of many whose gift to the world went unrecognised, except perhaps by his sons, grandchildren, wife, parents, brothers and sisters, and all those he knew him well.

John Breakwell

My 20th Century Life

Pre-School Days

I have been told that, at around three years of age I became a wanderer, seeking out places of interest and unusual happenings. Although I had lost interest in the very small yard in which I played, my days had not been lonely. The neighbours had stopped to chat to me as they walked up and down the common path, against the factory wall, which cast a permanent shadow on to my small play area. Traders had a few cheerful words for me as they delivered their goods. The milkman, carrying a small churn from his cart in the street, filled the housewives' jugs, using a long handled half pint measure. The baker carrying a large wicker basket, filled with freshly baked bread, which lived up to his name, Mr. Blackham. The crusts were often black. The coal man carrying our weekly one hundred-weight bag of coal, which he tipped through a grill in my yard, into the cellar below. The dustmen carrying dustbins along the path, to the dust cart in the street. The dust bins were heavy. Each one being filled with ashes from the fire, on which we burned most of our refuse. Completely worn out clothes, scraps of food, in fact anything, providing we were certain that it was of no further use, went on to the fire, to save coal.

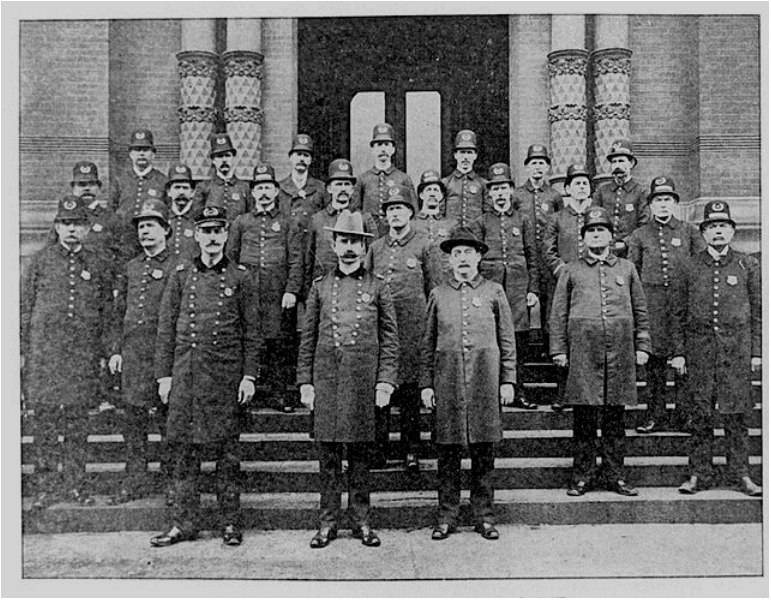
I started to investigate this path, calling upon our neighbours, and often being rewarded with a slice of cake. The nearer I got to the street the more interesting it seemed. The clip, clop of horse's hooves attracted me. It was a little brighter out there and children were playing on the footpath, which was the only playground available. The horse road, which was just wide enough for two vehicles, mainly horses and carts, to pass each other, was littered with horse manure. The odour of which was clearly noticeable. This being our natural habitat, it did not worry us. We children played in the gutters, on to which, during wet weather, this manure was washed. We did not seem to be infected by this pollution. A doctor I once knew, who had lived in similar circumstances as a child, told me that he thought that we children must have immunised ourselves against the germs, which were obviously there, by building up anti-bodies to fight off the diseases.

The opposite pavement to the one on which we played, was overshadowed by a twelve-foot high brick wall, separating the railway goods yard from the street. Two large gates in this wall acted as an exit from the goods yard. The wall stretched the whole length of the street and continued up a steep hill on the other side of the junction with Icknield Street, broken only by the gates to the goods yard. The total length being about half a mile. One or two horses were always available on working days, at the bottom of this steep hill. Known as

chain horses, their job was to be chained to heavy carts, to help them up the hill to the entrance gates. I was sorry for these horses, who with the cart horses, were forced, by men shouting and beating them, to strain every muscle to move the heavy carts on the steep slippery cobbles of this hill. Horses sometimes fell and found it very difficult to get back on their feet, occasionally breaking a leg. This was a disaster. The horse had to be shot and its body taken away to be disposed of by the knacker. I did not like watching and walked away. I have since thought that without this 'noble beast', the economy of that time would have been drastically reduced. Yet they were used like machines, to be disposed of when no longer of use.

On my early forages into the street, mother would often turn out, with some of our terrace neighbours, to search for me in the surrounding streets. They were not concerned about child snatchers, who did not exist and were not known of at that time, but of me getting lost, or stepping out into the road under the horses' hooves. They need not have worried, I soon became streetwise and able to find my way about.

Criminals were few and far between. The police had a firm hand on crime and almost invariably got their man. Sentences in the Courts were severe and prison



Birmingham Police - Evening Shift

life was a real punishment. To be caught in an act of crime, however small, was a disgrace; not only to the perpetrator, but also to his family. Murders were few. So few that the only media, the newspapers, printed editions giving information on police action, apprehension, court hearings, sentence and the gallows. Newspaper boys ran up and down the streets, in an excitable manner, shouting 'Special, special, read all about it'. 'Specials' were not issued for murderers only, but for all important and unusual news. A good boost for circulation. What a difference to today, when murders are commonplace.

My dad's Uncle Will tried to teach me the rules of the horse road. He lived two doors from us in the terrace. I would occasionally bump into him on sunny days, leaning against the wall at the street entrance to the terrace, getting a little sunshine and observing ‘goings-on' in the street. As could be seen from his attire, he worked for the railway as a 'carter' (driving a horse and cart); dressed in railway britches, which without his leggings, clung tightly to his ankles, an inch or so above his heavy black boots. His railway waistcoat, with shining metal buttons, almost covered his collarless shirt, which completed his ensemble. With hands in his trouser pockets, he would say to me, 'Well now young man, where am you off to?'. Without waiting for an answer he continued, 'Now you mind out for them 'ossies' (horses), them bite you know'. This was his way of keeping me on the footpath. I did hear his sojourns into the street were not only to get some sunshine. His wife, Aunty Mollie, was reputed to be house-proud and he vacated the house to give her the space in which to tidy up. I think that perhaps his mind was on the little village on the green slopes of Clee Hill, in which he spent his younger days and wondering why he was tempted away from that clean, fresh air, to live in his present noisy, overcrowded, smoky environment.

In 1919 I made friends with Arthur and Gordon who lived in neighbouring houses, facing on to the street. They were the only children in their families, which explains the reason why their parents could afford the rent for these larger houses with private facilities. I tempted them out into the street to see if there was anything of interest to observe.

There were public houses on the corners of most long streets, making the men's favourite meeting places easily available. These were their places of relaxation from the work of the day. The only form of entertainment, other than sitting in their small houses. Their wives seemed to think of this as the husband's rights. Their job was to look after children and the wage earner, which meant a full twenty four hours a day, with little or no entertainment. We children found

some interest outside the public house at the top of the street. The Great War had ended a few months earlier and just before the 2pm closing time, we listened to the men singing in the bar. An interest which came to an end when mother became aware of this. Most of the men had clear memories of this terrible war. They sang songs such as 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', 'Tipperary' and my favourite, 'The Rose of No Man's Land', which I still remember. The last lines of which were, 'In the world's great curse, stood a Red Cross nurse, the pride of the Motherland'. These lines were sung with great gusto, just before the men started to stream out of the bar. There was often a small group of women waiting outside; their object being to try to get some housekeeping money from their husbands before they spent it on beer. The result was husband and wife involved in shouting, screaming and fighting. An unusual occurrence outside on the streets. One which the police frowned upon. These few husbands were the scum of the earth, who did not abide by the rule that they should provide for their families before their own pleasure. The men in the bar were disgusted with them and would not drink or talk to such types; making this so clear that these scoundrels had to move on from one public house to another.

Another interest was watching the delivery of beer from the brewery, when two men perched on a high seat at the front of the cart, looked out over two strong shire horses, with well polished, shining harnesses, as they guided them to a stop against the pavement at the side of the public house. The pavement had two strong flap doors covering the cellar below, into which large barrels of beer, each weighing up to four hundredweight, were to be delivered. The men jumped up on to the flat backed cart and proceeded to wrap two stout lengths of rope around a barrel, from which they laid these ropes over the edge of the cart and across the pavement to drop the remainder through the hatch. By releasing these and holding the ropes, the barrel slowly moved out of the cart on to the pavement and across this to the cellar head, where with a bit of juggling, with both men holding firmly to the rope they dropped the barrel slowly down the rope to the cellar below. Talk about the Indian rope trick... The heavy barrel had been controlled, by the ropes wrapped around it, during the

whole manoeuvre. Each barrel was dealt with in the same manner until the delivery was completed. Our main interest was to see if they made a mistake and crashed the barrel, which never happened.

Shops abounded everywhere. The large stores in the town centre, with small groups of shops in all outlying areas. These were supplemented by 'Hucksters' shops, which stocked almost everything needed for the home, at slightly dearer prices than those of the larger shops. These were convenient to the public, there being one in almost every good sized street. Many had been opened in the front room of a house, facing on to the street, by enterprising housewives and widows. They fitted in with the cash-starved economy of that time by selling goods in small quantities. Half a pound of sugar. Two ounces of tea. Two pence worth of syrup. Half a pint of paraffin. Half a bar of soap, etc. Housewives found this useful, particularly towards the end of the week, when their purses were almost empty and would not stretch to the point when they could get larger quantities at slightly lower prices, from the group shops. Group shops, being more economical, were used for the main shopping of the week, when household purses had been replenished by husbands. A further attraction to 'Hucksters' shops was that everyone in the street knew the owner, who was a neighbour, and often a friend.

Except for Sundays, when all work, other than essential services, ceased, I was awakened early by factory hooters, of various tones, reminding their workmen that starting time was imminent, if they wanted to get into work before the gates closed. As depicted by Lowry's 'Matchstick Men', the streets became full of workers wearing tattered jackets, greasy trousers and caps, all running or walking quickly to get into work on time. Employers did not accept bad timekeeping. Some thinking that this was cheating the employer. Gates were closed on the stroke of eight a.m. and most latecomers lost a day's work, which they could ill afford. Persistent latecomers were sacked on the spot. Employment laws did not exist. The employers could do as they wished, with no redress available to the employee. Employers did not take advantage of this, unless they thought the employee was unreliable.

At eight a.m. the streets were quiet, until railway carts, mixed with a few motorised vehicles, started to fill the horse road, on their way to deliver goods from the yard. The streets were populated by people who regardless of the frugality of their lives, were in the main law abiding citizens. They rarely criticised the Government and revered Royalty. Their employment was their main interest. To earn an honest 'bob' was all they desired. Admittedly, there

were a few who did not fit into this category and led a more carefree life, within the framework of the law. Animals, such as pigs, sheep and cattle, which had been forwarded by rail, occasionally streamed out of the goods yard, herded by men known as drovers. They were on their way to the butcher's yards for slaughter. A few tried to escape by turning into any space, such as terrace entrances. Occasionally a bullock became stuck between the two walls in our terrace, in any attempt to escape.

Sundays were quiet days, when we children were told to play the less boisterous games. My friends and I found interest in listening to the Salvation Army Band, as they held drum head services on a wide pavement opposite the public house. We liked watching as they lined up and marched away behind their band. We also marched, as well as we were able, by the side of the Boy Scouts and Boys' Brigade drum and bugle bands, as they marched their members to and from church through the traffic free streets. At around mid-day we found our way home. Our appetites being wetted by the odour of roasting meat wafting through the doors of every house. It was customary for every family to have a full meal of roast beef, lamb or pork, with two vegetables, on Sundays. This was made economical by spreading the remaining meat over two or three days. The general rule being roast on Sundays, cold on Mondays and any leftovers being minced on Tuesdays. Poultry, being more expensive, was bought for special days, such as Easter Sunday or Christmas Day.

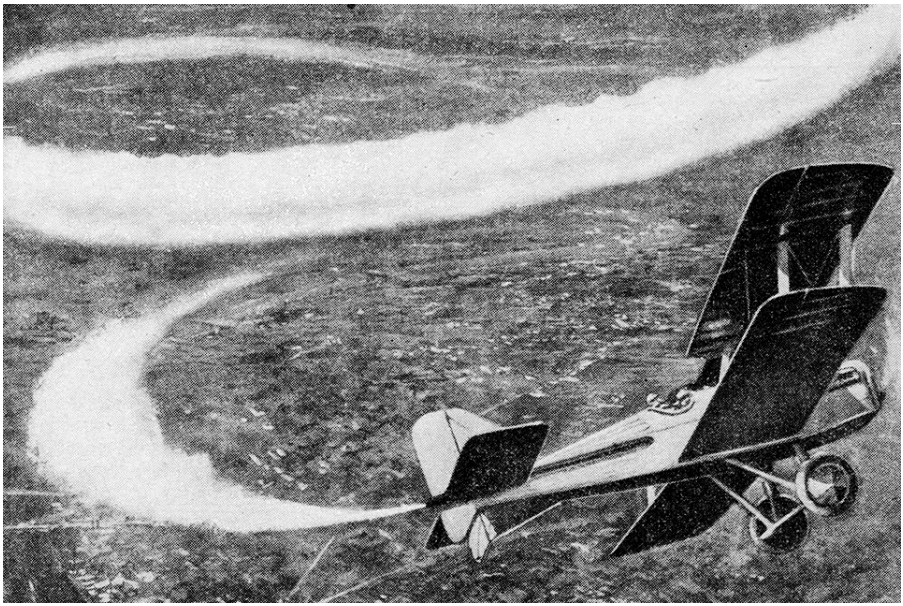
Sundays were the only days of the week on which we ate as a family. We squeezed our way through the chairs to sit in our accustomed place, where, with elbows tucked in, we had our dinner. Mostly this was roast beef, with Yorkshire Pudding, varied on occasions with leg of lamb or pork, whichever fitted in with the household budget. Dad carved the meat, keeping his eye on us younger ones. He was, very much an Edwardian type of father, who insisted upon compliance with his orders. Mother stood in the small area of floor behind his armchair, which contained the cast iron gas stove, ready to fill the plates with vegetables as each one was served with the hot meat. She took what was left after everyone was served. This was a never varying routine at Sunday dinners. To follow, we always had a sweet of various types, whichever mother could afford. After dinner the remaining meat was put away on a shelf on the cellar head, which was not frequented by flies. This cellar head was, however, subject to the odour of coke and gas from the cellar below and had one or two shelves on which we stored our fresh goods. It must have been hygienic. We never suffered from food poisoning. Refrigeration was out of the question. It was non-existent. As was electricity, which may have started to be used for lighting in a few wealthy households. Gas, as I may have mentioned, was used, with the aid of gas mantels to provide light in the home and to fuel the gas stove. Many houses did not have this facility and had to use oil lamps for lighting and fires for cooking.

Our food was bought fresh from the shops. It was direct from the farm. Grown, or reared, on open farm land. Concentrated farming of animals and vegetables had not been thought of. Pesticides and artificial cattle feeds were not in use. Poultry were free to roam around the field in which the 'Hen Houses' were situated. No battery hens, in consequence, no salmonella. Animals, being reared on open fields of grass, with hay, chopped swedes and turnips, to supplement their winter food. No artificial food was used, thus no B.S.E. (mad cow disease). Having experienced food from natural farming for a good portion of my life, I can honestly say that present day farming has caused a large deterioration in the flavour of the food I once knew. I know that without concentrated farming it would be impossible to feed the greatly increased population of today. Surely the boffins could work out a safer solution to this very important problem.

It was good to be together, as a family, on Sundays. There was a united feeling about it. Although we met our siblings, coming and going from the house during the week, we were able to cement our relationship at our Sunday dinners. That and the bonding, caused by our mother, has held us in good stead

throughout our long lives. We have lived knowing that, in time of trouble, the family will be there to do their best to help.

I saw my first aeroplane at four years of age, when an unusual buzzing sound, above our heads, attracted my attention. Everyone in the terrace turned out to see this flimsy biplane, which was almost certainly one which had seen service over the fields of Flanders, during the recent war. The two wings were fixed to struts of wood, kept in place by lengths of wire, with a light weight body protruding through the wings. I do not need to elaborate upon this, as most people have seen pictures of these early planes. It wobbled from side to side as it wrote advertisements, in smoke, across the sky, such as 'Bovril is good for You'. 'Oxo for Taste', etc. It seemed so unstable, with just one propeller keeping it in the air, that I thought it might fall on to our heads. Little did I think that this was the forerunner to the air liners of today, which whisk us off to all parts of the earth.



School Days

I reached five years of age during December 1921 and started school the following January. Regardless of mother's encouragement, I was not impressed. I had lost my freedom. The large room I was taken to was dark and dismal, being cut off from the daylight by sliding doors, separating our classroom from the one next door, which had natural light from windows looking out on to the street. The little light which managed to get through windows in the sliding door was supplemented by the dull glow from gas lights above our heads. A very bad environment for five year olds. The smell of burning gas, mixed with that or chalk, plus the odour of forty bodies, some unwashed from the day before, did nothing to dispel our fears of imprisonment. I was directed to one of the double desks, arranged in straight lines on a rising dais, to sit beside a girl, who had certainly not been washed that morning and smelt of urine. There was a dolls house in one corner of the room, which gave the impression of a less severe routine, but this was for cosmetic use only. No one ever played with it. Instead of play, our attention was drawn to a large blackboard on which a severe looking, middle aged lady was writing in chalk, the first letters of the alphabet. We were to learn this alphabet very well. Our teacher, the severe lady, insisted upon this. Failure to pay attention was frowned upon. Regardless of the pupils ability, she stood over the culprits, reading the riot act, whilst tapping the desk with a ruler. In the next class we were taught how to put these letters into words and were introduced to figures. Again by the use of the blackboard, from which we had to chant the times table, until we knew the ones to five's by heart, with a step up in punishment. In this class we received a rap across the knuckles with the ruler, for most misdemeanours.
We moved up, at eight years of age, to learn reading and writing, together with sums and were introduced to a large globe, from which we started to find other countries and their location in the world. Again we received the ruler for any step out of line.

At the age of nine, although my writing was shaky at times, I could write unjoined words and do simple arithmetic. The teacher was male and kept a stick on his desk, to deter anyone trying to step out of line. The girls had moved to another, girls only, class and we boys were deemed to be of age to receive the stick, when necessary.

I cannot, of course, remember the details of this early learning, but can remember the punishment which became more and more severe as I went up in

age. It was of no use to complain to parents. They looked upon the teachers as little gods, whose job it was to teach and educate us. Teachers were, after all, middle class and could do no wrong. School was to me a necessary evil. I lived for playtimes, home-times and holidays, but must admit that I was fairly adept at reading, writing and arithmetic, by the time that I went up into the 'Big Boys School'.

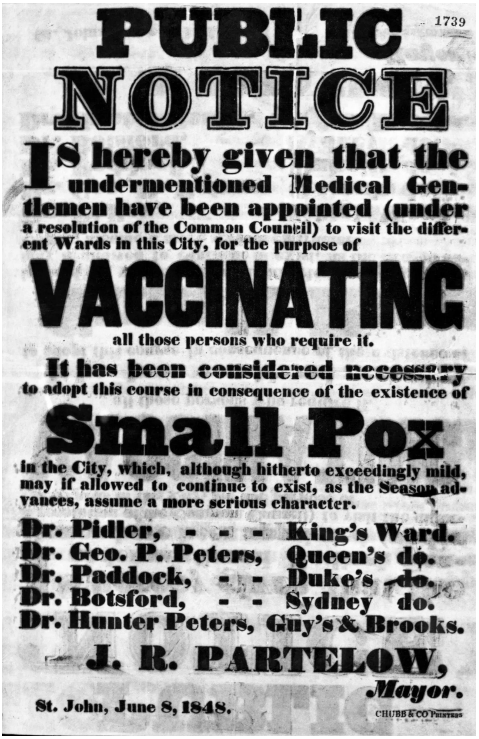
It was during school holidays that I was introduced to the marvel of motorised vehicles. Dad took me out for a day, delivering small packages to shops and factories, in his Ford truck. I sat beside him on the bench seat where he tried to explain to me the various controls. The accelerator on the steering wheel, for which he used the words advance for increasing the speed and retard for throttle back. It was circular, being fitted within finger reach, under the steering wheel. He told me that it had to have petrol and air and it was difficult to balance them correctly. The brakes were, as today, a pedal on the floor and a lever near the gear change. Changing gear was a difficult task, known as 'double de-clutching'. To avoid crashing the gears he had to guess the speed of the engine and move the gate change lever into the gear at the right time. Gate change was a lever which was pulled sideways out of the gear-niche, to disconnect the gear and moved into the higher, or lower, niche when the engine was moving at approximately the right speed. Driving was not easy. A driver had to know his engine and react to it's needs. Starting up the engine was also difficult. As most of us know, this had to be accomplished by the use of a starting handle, under the engine, at the front of the vehicle, which when turned, filled the cylinders and sparked the plugs. To get this right was difficult. The starting handle had to be turned at the correct speed to fit in with the engine. Sometimes the petrol entering the cylinders was going in at a greater speed than necessary, causing the cylinders to flood. This often caused a

backfire, causing the connected handle to swing back sharply, when, to avoid serious bruising to the hands or wrist, the handle had to be rapidly dropped. Again I say that the driver had to know his engine and the speed at which to start the engine. Yes, driving and looking after a vehicle, in those days, was a work of art. I was also able to inspect the heavy lorry on which my brother, Bill, worked as a driver's 'mate'. Bill took me to see it when he called at the house one day. It was known as a – G.E.C., made by the General Engineering Company, and could carry up to ten hundred-weight. To reach the cab I had to climb up two steps, to find myself overlooking most of the traffic in the streets. Having no doors, or windows, the cab was open to all types of weather. There was a roll of canvas on the roof, at the front of the cab, which could be pulled forward to protect the driver and mate, below their heads, in wet and snowy conditions. Although of little use, this canvas was also pulled forward to protect them in freezing cold weather. Having six cylinders the engine was powerful. Starting this was a job for the experienced. It had a large heavy starting handle, which had to be carefully used to turn the engine, and at the same time to avoid the consequences of a backfire which, with this powerful engine, could mean a broken arm if the handle was not disengaged from the engine in time. Again the driver had to know his engine. As in the Ford truck, the gears were operated through a gate change. Slipping in the gear at the correct revolution of the engine was necessary, to avoid damage to the gears.

Nineteen Twenty-Four

At eight years of age everyone in the school had to be vaccinated against smallpox. This was the first of the immunisation and vaccination programmes, followed, as they were discovered, by many others. Great care was taken with this original smallpox vaccination. We went up to be scratched on the arm and receive the vaccine. After which we had the affected area covered with a small bandage and we were given a yellow band to put on the vaccinated arm of our jacket to warn our school friends, who had been informed that, under a threat of severe punishment, they must not touch or injure this arm. Though the arm was sore we did not remove the bandage for at least a week, when the scab, which turned into a lifelong white circle, was found.

Nits and bugs were prevalent in children's hair and caring mothers spent hours washing with smelly 'Durback' and combing out the bugs, only to find that they were back again within a short time. There was no such thing as school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PUBLIC

NOTICE

IS hereby given that the undermentioned Medical Gentlemen have been appointed (under a resolution of the Common Council) to visit the different Wards in this City, for the purpose of

VACCINATING

all those persons who require it.

It has been considered necessary to adopt this course in consequence of the existence of

Small Pox

in the City, which, although hitherto exceedingly mild, may if allowed to continue to exist, as the Season advances, assume a more serious character.

Dr. Pidler, - - - King's Ward.
Dr. Geo. P. Peters, Queen's do.
Dr. Paddock, - - Duke's do.
Dr. Botsford, - - Sydney do.
Dr. Hunter Peters, Guy's & Brooks.

J. R. PARTELOW,
Mayor.

St. John, June 8, 1848.

CHUBB & CO Printers

uniforms. Parents simply could not afford them. Children attended school in short trousers, often patched and torn, a jacket which had seen better days, a tattered shirt and any form of footwear. I often saw boys, whose boots had soles which had become separated from the uppers. They attempted to keep them together with pieces of rope, which needed constant adjustment. The Birmingham Mail newspaper had a fund for providing boots for those who could not afford them. These boots, known as 'Mail Boots' were distributed after an inspection of our footwear by the benefactors. I attempted to polish and refurbish my boots before this inspection, in the fear that I might be picked, which, to me, would have been an indication of poverty. Those who wore mail boots were easily distinguished. The boots were strong and heavy, having hob nailed soles, which cried out 'Mail Boots', from the metallic thump they produced when walking on the pavement. I cannot remember any of us children deriding the wearers, as children normally do. Perhaps we thought, 'There, but for the grace of God, go I'. There was very little difference between being poor or poverty stricken, at that time. I must add that this charity was not for our school only. These boots were provided to needy children, in elementary schools, throughout the Birmingham area. Regardless of the drawbacks of

clothing, etc., we children were healthy and in the main sturdy. Mothers went without to provide as much as possible for them.

It was during this year that I saw the only working foundry which I have ever seen. It was a hot summer's day and the enormous doors, which ran on large rails, had been drawn back, leaving the interior open to view. What I saw frightened me to death. Dante's inferno had nothing on this. At the far end of this very large foundry was a massive furnace, glowing with heat, with men running around it, channelling white hot molten metal into containers, which ran on strong wires across their heads. The white hot metal was spitting out and falling to the floor, like silvery stars, causing the men to jump away - from the danger of becoming seriously burned. The metal was run off into moulds and cores, where it stayed to cool into solid metal parts. The heat inside must have been almost unbearable for the foundry workers. Every time that the furnace doors opened, a blast of very hot air blew into the faces of my friends and myself, standing in the doorway.

Most of the information I have mentioned above was given to me by my second eldest brother, Les, who, during that year, passed his fourteenth birthday and had taken up employment, as a core maker, at a similar foundry. What had induced Les into taking on this job, as an apprentice core-maker, I shall never know. Perhaps he was tempted by the fact that trained core-makers earned above average wages. In which case he was right. He became manager of a small foundry, in the Black Country, at 35 years of age and went on to become the managing director of a larger foundry later. This is an example of the type of work available at that time. Men took these jobs to earn good money, knowing that it was dangerous and not a healthy occupation. The employers had no statutory responsibility to protect their employees.

Nineteen Twenty-Five

Traffic on the streets had changed. There were now more motorised vehicles than horses and carts. The surfaces of the roads were being changed from cobbles to a form of tarmac, by covering the cobbles with hot tar, heated to a runny consistency in a mobile furnace on wheels. This was covered immediately with a fine grit. The result being a smoother, less durable surface, which was more suitable to motorised traffic. Apart from the ever present odour of heated tar, we children found the new surface was of use to us. We could now play at whip and top and after 6 pm when the roads became

deserted, we turned into the road to play football on this much improved surface. The police, however, were not happy with this use of the road, which was against the law. The beat policeman, who was well aware of our activity, occasionally managed to catch one of us, to whom he read the riot act. Explaining, whilst tapping the head of the offender, that this was unlawful behaviour. He also mentioned the police station and the law courts, but, to the best of my knowledge, he never arrested the culprit. I am sure he knew that the road was the only space in which to play and in accordance with his duty, put in the odd appearance, to keep this activity at a low level.

We had three policemen, who alternated their shifts, on our beat. Our parents knew that one of these could be found on the streets in our area. Most people had respect of the beat 'bobby', who they knew would help them in times of trouble. In general, the relationship between the police and the public was of a friendly nature. Our parents taught us to respect them as friends.

Parliamentary elections were an exciting experience and we children knew that we could step over the traces a little. At the invitation of the canvassers we took dustbin lids and went round the streets, banging the lids with a stick and inviting the public to vote for their candidate. Lorries were provided for us to pile into and lean over the sides, shouting and singing, 'Vote, vote, vote for Mr. Chamberlain. He is sure to win the day. You can get old Mr. ‘Bloggs’ and put him in a can and he won't come voting any more'. The candidates held grown up meetings on wide areas of pavements and in the terraces, to explain their policies and answer questions. There were often scuffles amongst men at the meetings, who had differing opinions, which the attending policeman soon put an end to. Although they had recently won the right to vote, women very rarely attended these meetings. I am sure that working class wives left this to their husbands and voted in accordance with their wishes. Voting day was quiet and peaceful. Rather a let down to us children, who wanted the excitement to carry on. Everyone went on seriously with their business.

Holidays

As I have mentioned, many families could not afford to go away for a holiday and had to be content with days out on the tram to the outskirts of the city, where there were open spaces, with grass and trees to be seen. They took sandwiches of cheese and jam, with water in a bottle, to sustain them through the day. We were fortunate to be one of the few families who had

relatives in the country with whom they could stay. The older ones usually stayed with Dad's parents, at the Limes, in which area a number of relatives also lived. The younger ones went with mother to her parents' farm, a few miles away in Worcestershire. To us children this was the highlight of the year. Dad, being a railway employee, was entitled to a free journey for himself and family once a year. Apart from the trams, which operated within the city boundaries and rickety, uncomfortable single deck buses, which travelled to and from Midland towns, the only available public transport outside the town, was by rail. Because of the cost of transport, around half of working class people stayed within the city limits. Dad's free passes made it possible for us, as a large family, to travel by rail.

At the beginning of August each year we looked forward with great excitement to our holidays in the country. The wide open green fields were a great attraction to town children who rarely had the pleasure of seeing any greenery. On the appointed day, mother and five of her children, dressed in the best clothes we could find, started to walk to the nearest station, a short distance from home. Our luggage, which consisted of one change of clothes for the boys and a few dresses for the girls, was not very heavy. Bill and Les were now at work and could not join us. We arrived at the platform, which was well populated with people. Most of whom were travelling for the same purpose, to visit relatives in the country.

Uncle Will, Granny's brother, who was taking his week's holiday with relatives in a little village on the slopes of the Clee Hills, came up to us, dressed in his suit, which was quite a change from his usual railway uniform. Pulling his watch from his waistcoat pocket, he declared in a loud voice that, 'Them be coming up in a minute. Be a tanker I should think'. He then replaced the watch in his pocket and with thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, stood looking up the line, to see if his declaration had been true. Although he was only a carter, he was proud of the fact that he was a railway man and wanted all the passengers to know this. He was a kind man, who, although his income was low, had given each of us a penny to get some 'sucks' for the journey, as he said. We did not take long to spend this by obtaining Nestle's chocolate bars from a machine on the platform. The train arrived and we all scrambled into a compartment, arguing a little, as to who would sit by the windows. Mother sorted us out and we were on our way to the lush pasture of Grandpa and Grandma's farm in Worcestershire. The train stopped at every station on our way to Kidderminster and we thrilled with excitement as the uniformed porters at each station ran up and down the train, calling out the station's name and information at each

junction, for those who needed to change trains. We had heard the names of these stations on previous annual visits and became even more excited when we changed trains at Kidderminster.

It was a small train which we moved on to, pulled by a 'Matchbox' engine. So named because it resembled a large matchbox. Being a small engine, it puffed a lot to gain its maximum speed of about forty miles an hour, which, to us, was very fast. The older ones knew the next station before we reached it and chanted out Bewdley, Cleobury Mortimer, at which Uncle Will left the train to catch an even smaller train, on a single track, to his native village. One which we knew well, because of visits to Granny and Grandad, at the 'Limes'. This train carried livestock and goods, in addition to passengers. It travelled so slowly that the eternal joke was that one could step out and pick the wild flowers on the side of the line as we travelled. We still had three stations, bedecked with flowers, to go before we reached our destination, Tenbury Wells, where we were met by Uncle Perce (Percival), my mother's brother, who had brought the horse and trap to carry us the three miles to the farm. Our joy knew no bounds. We sat, three at the front and three at the back, on the high seats of the trap, listening to mother and Uncle Perce chatting in the rural dialect of the area. The horse had quite a job pulling the heavy load. The older ones amongst us had to get off and walk up the steeper hills. I have travelled a lot in my time, but never

regained the joy we felt then. Here we were, five children living in a smoke-filled environment, overshadowed by brick walls with pavements as a playground, being transported in style through a paradise of clean country air, and an abundance of green fields, hedges and wild flowers. We knew, from previous visits, that our grandparents house was spacious, with plenty of rooms in which to play during wet weather. What more could we ask for?

We travelled on past fields of golden corn and hops, clinging to poles, passing pretty cottages with flowers and vegetables growing in their gardens and occasional farm houses, some of which had outbuildings, covered with a pointed roof which, we were told, were known as 'oast houses', used for drying hops. Eventually we reached our destination. One of us climbed down to open the gate into the drive, which led us past two fields to the large farm house, sitting on the top of a small hill. Grandma, who, like mother, was small in stature, was at the door to greet us. She led us into the house, past a shed on our right, which held large barrels of cider, known by dad as hogs heads and used by the men as and when they needed refreshments. This was a large farm of around three hundred acres and as befitted this, the house was spacious, having five rooms and a dairy downstairs, with eight bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. Three flights of stairs led to the bathroom, the first floor and the second floor respectively. The house was always kept in a clean and tidy condition, which involved a lot of housework. This, however, was just a fraction of the work which grandma had to accomplish each week. She continued to endeavour to be as self reliant as possible.

Bread and cakes, for the week, were baked each Thursday, in a heat retaining oven, into which brushwood was placed and fired. When this was burned the ashes were cleared from the oven. After which the bread and cakes were, immediately, put inside to bake in the retaining heat. The dough was mixed in a deep, long trough and left to rise overnight, on Wednesdays. Tuesday were butter days. When the week's cream was moved from the dairy and poured into a large churn, to be churned, by hand, for about one hour. The butter milk was then run off into buckets and carried to the pig waste container, to provide extra food for the pigs. The butter was removed from the churn and taken to a large cellar below the house, to be made up into decorative half pound blocks, ready for market.

Grandma employed two girls to help with the many jobs in and around the house. I have mentioned only three of these jobs. There was also the preparation and cooking of meals for eight people, which increased to as many

as twelve when, as often, visitors arrived. Grandma was an excellent cook, whom many chefs would have been pleased to emulate. Poultry, game birds, rabbits, you name it, she could turn it into an appetising meal. A large baron of beef was delivered each weekend for use on Sunday. Mother who had learned the art from her, at a young age, was also an excellent cook, but did not have the range of food, or the fresh herbs, available to her. The care of up to sixty heads of poultry and newly born chickens, came under Grandma's umbrella. Opening the hen houses in the early mornings, to allow these free range hens, chickens and cockerels to wander around an open field and after a meal of corn, picking up the necessary grit for egg shells and feeding on nature's gifts of seeds and berries. These happy, contented birds provided many good, healthy eggs each day, which were collected for market. There was also a perfectly reared cockerel always available for the table, which, when required, would be killed by the men and plucked, cleaned and gutted by grandma and the girls, who took this as a normal everyday task, as they did when skinning, cutting and cleaning rabbits. A very different mode of life, when one considers the ready prepared packages of meat from the supermarket shelves today. The result being a very appetising meal. I have explained the above as examples of the work encompassed by grandma and the two girls. It would take a lot of writing to explain the multitude of other jobs required at this large farm.

All the animals, cattle, sheep, pigs, were, in accordance with the method of farming at that time, reared on open fields. They had been farming since the latter years of the last century and continued to run the farm in the same way. I have not mentioned the main powerhouse. The four, sometimes five, shire horses, whose job it was to pull all the wagons, carts and machinery, such as ploughs, mowers, horse rakes, binders for cutting and binding sheaves of corn, harrows to break up the soil, etc. Without this horsepower the farm would have been at a standstill. Sid, the wagoner, who had worked for grandpa most of his working life and was considered as one of the family, tended these horses. To visit the stable in the early morning we would find him humming, or whistling through his teeth, as he groomed each one. He knew the work they would be doing that day and would talk to them as he fitted on their harness.
He said to us, ‘You must na’ stand at the back on em, stand at the side’, he said. ‘You'm be safe there. They canna kick forward’.
He need not have worried, we children respected and feared these tall, heavy beasts.

Back to the house, where it was easy to see that this had been the home of a 'Gentlemen' farmer, one who administered, but did not work on the farm, from

the bell pulls in the sitting and dining rooms. Grandpa, who was getting old, no longer worked, but directed. He had now taken on the roll of a 'Gentleman' farmer and continued to run the farm in the same way as the former one. At breakfast, each morning, he would discuss this with his three bachelor sons and Sid, the wagoner, when decisions were made as to the day's work. Mother was always given the guest's bedroom, which was very well furnished, containing polished dark oak furniture, including a wide four poster bed and a decorative wash stand, which held a large crock basin and jug, decorated with flowers. The smallest item is one to remember well, a soap dish containing scented soap, which dispelled its sweet odour around the bedroom. At home mother could not afford such luxury. We had to manage with 'Sunlight' or carbolic soap.

I can only remember one occasion on which I slept in this room, I was around four years of age. No doubt I had been in the room, with mother, when I was a baby and would not be able to remember that occasion. My place would have been taken by my younger brothers, Stan and Roy; I was relegated to one of the men's rooms, on the second floor. I do remember the sweet smell of the toilet soap, which was so attractive that I had the urge to taste it. Mother had hot water carried to the bedroom each morning and her waste water taken away during the day. There was no running water in the house. All the household water was drawn by pumps from wells below the house. I think that I have written enough for the reader to realise that these holidays, at the farm, were thoroughly enjoyed by us children, and mother, who was released from her workshop and the constant worries involved in looking after her family, on what was still a shoestring budget, in a house which was, by no means, large enough for a family of nine people.

The trap was wheeled out and Bob, the trap horse, was harnessed to it as we said our goodbyes. Grandma gave us a sixpence each, a fortune in those days and we were on our way home, taking the train from Tenbury Wells station. We were not upset at leaving all this luxury. I remember that I accepted the fact that our holiday was at an end and looked forward to the train ride. I had my friends at home and my sixpence to spend.

I have written about a holiday taken during the early 1920's, when the farm was doing well. This was just after the Great War. I have already mentioned that this was a period of full employment, although wages were set at a point where large families had a lean time trying to live on the average wage. Factories and general trading were doing well, changing from the production of armaments to the needs of a peacetime economy. Farm produce was in demand and market prices were high. Unfortunately, the crash of the Wall Street Stock Market, at the end of this decade, reverberated throughout the world. We entered the 1930's with the closing of many factories and workplaces. Others were forced to cut down on their employees. Short time working, with considerable reductions in wages, became the mode of the day. This had a disastrous effect upon prices for farm produce. By the middle of the 1930's, people in towns throughout the country, could hardly afford to feed themselves and farmers were finding that they were getting less than the cost of seeds for their products. Grandpa was caught in this trap. Prices at the markets and auction yards, plummeted to an all time low. He had never before experienced such a situation. They had been erratic in the past, going up and down, but never so low over such a period of time. The effect of this caused him to take out bank loans, from year to year. The bank foreclosed on these loans during 1938 and the farm was sold. One year later, with the outbreak of World War II, full employment returned, bringing with it good prices for farm produce. Grandpa, who was devastated by the loss of his farm, died one year later. Grandma continued to assist her sons, who rented the farm from the new owners and eventually died at a mother's retirement home in Shropshire.The Streets - 1925

Back to the streets, where the traffic, now mainly motorised, seemed more numerous, following our time away. The forty mile journey, with a change of train at Kidderminster, had taken four hours to accomplish. But we did have free passes on the trains and there was no other reasonable way to travel. Cars were not, as yet, financially available to working class people. At nine years of age I was allowed to stay out until 8 p.m. We played in the road and on the footpaths, after the traffic ceased, with the end of the working day. Our

attention was taken up by the watchman, frying up his evening meal on a burning brazier outside his hut. He did not seem to mind us children taking up some of his night's vigil, ensuring that the paraffin lights, placed around the roadwork trenches, were fuelled for the night and that everything was safe. At dusk we heard the familiar clop, click of the lamplighter, as he pushed his pole

into the street gas lights, to switch on the gas, and out again, to move on to the next one, about fifty yards away. The effect was to give a dull orange coloured light throughout the street, so dull that we were unable to recognise a passer-by, unless they were near the lamp post.

The General Strike - 1925

The Spring of this year was cold. I remember going into the house to warm my fingers, to find that our one and only fire in the living room was not burning, and that mother was wearing an old overcoat to keep warm. She told me that the miners had stopped working and we did not have coal. The word 'strike' was not known. It was so unusual that I doubt if it appeared in the dictionary. Mother explained that the miners had stopped work because they were getting very low wages, considering the risks they took each day working underground in unsafe pits, and they knew of no other way to impress the

owners. The following day I was asked to go to the coal yard, at the top of the street, near to the canal, on which coal barges delivered coal. I stood in a long queue whilst the coal men weighed twenty eight pounds each, on a large pair of balance scales, with weights on one side and a large metal scoop on the other, tipping this minimal amount of coal into a small, two wheeled hand cart, for which we paid a returnable sixpence when we returned the cart. This quarter of our normal weekly consumption had to be used very sparingly for a few weeks. It was fortunate that this lack of coal occurred during the early Spring, when the weather had become a little warmer. From what I now know, it was at the end of April 1926 that I walked down the entry to find Uncle Will leaning against the wall, at the entrance to the terrace.
'You mind them soldiers,' he said, 'they'n shoot you if you get too near.'
I looked up the street to see if we was joking and saw two soldiers guarding the double gates to the goods yard. He told me that no one was working that day. I now knew why Dad was at home on a working day. Mother seemed a bit worried when I left the house. She would have been wondering how she was going to manage without the housekeeping money. No work, no money, was well understood by everyone.

Wandering around the streets I saw little groups of men talking. The trams were running at irregular intervals. Manned by young men, dressed in normal clothes, who seemed to be enjoying the situation. Ringing the warning bell as they travelled along. Very few passengers were entering, or leaving the trams. I now know that these young men were from middle class families and were enjoying this variation from studying at their colleges. They were showing their support for the Government and the employers. Not the suppressed workers, or the regular uniformed drivers and conductors, who were going to lose wages in support of the miners. I have mentioned that I lived amongst law-abiding citizens. Apart from a cat call from the occasional man, as the trams rolled by, the men did not interfere with these 'black legging' youths. I am sure that such a situation in today's world would be treated in a much more aggressive manner.

Although the General Strike was broken by the Government, the trade unions had taken notice of the power of workers and began to use this power to obtain better conditions for workers. From the time of the General Strike they threatened employers with the weapon of strike action, until in the early post world war years, when the unions' shop stewards, particularly in the car industry, demanded so much that the price of their products became expensive and a noticeable reduction in sales occurred, causing short time working, again

the unions had to take notice and consider the effect of strike action on their members. We have experienced strikes in various industries since then, but I am sure that the unions now consider all angles before taking this action, after all it is the workers who lose out in most cases.

Middle Class Living - 1927

In my eleventh year, I was informed by Mother that we were moving to a larger house, with a park, a few yards from the front door. She seemed to be quite pleased at the prospect of leaving our small house, where she had spent over ten years slaving to bring up her large family. Bill and Les were working and my eldest sister, Gladys, was nearing school leaving age. Cressy would also leave school within three years. The advantage of having a large family was beginning to emerge, we could now afford the extra rent.

Not without some misgiving at having to leave my friends, we moved a short time later to find that our new home was much larger, and could comfortably accommodate our large family. We entered through a vestibule door, leading into a long hall, off which were two large rooms, which, after a year or so, became our sitting and dining room, with a further large room at the end of the hall, used as a living room. Beyond the living room was a scullery, which contained an earthenware sink, with hot and cold water taps, and a large copper

boiler, heated by a fire below. Mother installed her wringer in this spacious scullery, making it into a laundry, which was also used for washing up the crockery, etc. To complete the ground floor there was a coal house and toilet, attached to the house outside. Mother no longer had to share the necessary facilities. All of which were private. She was now living as she had in the country, though she did, to a certain degree, miss the friendly atmosphere of the terrace. Upstairs were three bedrooms and a bathroom. Very few working class homes included bathrooms, at that time, which lead me to think that this house was previously tenanted by a middle class family. The house was owned by the railway company and had, most likely, been occupied by one of the railway managers, who would have been accepted as lower rung, middle class. A few doors away lived a family who employed a live-in servant, which fits in with my theory that these had been middle-class homes.

I soon crossed the road to investigate the park, which was separated from the roads by trees and greenery. What a delight, to a child who had always lived in an environment of bricks and mortar. I thought that I was on holiday and had difficulty in thinking that this was now my home. There were wide expanses of grass and two ponds. One in which the fish were spawned, known as the 'Lily Pond' and a large one, on which boats could be hired for a leisurely row. A bandstand in the centre of the park was visited by a band, playing mainly classical music, on Sundays during the summer months, when in dry weather people paid to sit in deck chairs, to relax to the sound of music. To add to these amusements, during frosty weather, in the winter, the pond froze. Occasionally sufficiently strong to enable ice skating, and children were able to make long slides. There was also an open air swimming pool, in which I learned to swim. I obtained the two pence entry fee by taking Dad's empty beer bottles back to the local outdoor public house, where I received a penny for each empty bottle returned. The main entrance to the park was on the Coventry Road. On the remaining three sides there were roads with large houses, the cost of which would have been prohibitive to working class families. Taking into account the facilities within the park and the large houses bordering this, there is no doubt that this area was one in which the middle class were, or had been living. The merging of middle and working classes came about by the key workers in factories and other places of work, who now received wages which were equal to the salaries of the middle class. Although the diction of the latter was still clearly distinguishable.

The year in which I attained my twelfth birthday, was one in which there was little of worth to mention. There was still full employment and wages had, with

a little pressure from the Unions, slightly improved. Employers had, at last, begun to realise the importance of their workers. Peace work, a system whereby workers were paid on the basis of their productivity, was very much in fashion.

Senior School - 1927

This seems to be convenient time for me to mention school. Particularly the school which I attended within a week of our arrival in this area, during 1927. It was a junior and senior boys school. The juniors having a separate playground at the back of the school. There was a girls school next door, but the rule 'Never the twain shall meet', was strictly observed. The Head Master, a Mr Far, insisted upon absolute obedience, which was noticeable from the ever present cane on every teacher's desk. This was used on the hands of boys who were deemed to have offended.

My eleventh birthday was during the December of 1927 and I was placed in a junior class until Christmas, where the cane was rarely used. I moved into the first class of the senior school in the January, when I noticed the strict manner in which the school was run; with the aid of a large hand bell. One ring required all boys to stop playing and stand still. Two rings was the signal to walk smartly to our designated class line, where our teachers joined us and tidied up the line. We were then marched off to the 'Big Hall' for prayers. Youngest class first. Silence was demanded from the outset. Late comers had to stand outside the hall and unless there was a sound reason for not arriving on time, were caned. The Head Master took his place on the podium and after a prayer and a hymn, delivered a short lecture on matters affecting the school. He then left the hall and we were marched off, in an orderly fashion, to our classrooms.

The teacher in my first class, a Mr. Smith was without doubt a real sadist who enjoyed inflicting pain and used the cane on the slightest pretext. An example was his boot inspection held every morning as we filed into the classroom. If a speck of dirt, or smear, was found on any boot the offender would be told to stand in a line for the cane. The cane, applied across our hands, was quite painful, leaving a distinct line of bruising. We always preferred our left hands, to avoid our writing hand, the cane spoiled our capability to write clearly, which could mean further punishment. We boys accepted this as something which could not be avoided and tried to find a cure to ease the pain. Rubbing the hand with resin was thought to toughen the skin, though it did little, other than to instil a little mind over matter. There were always one or two of us who brought

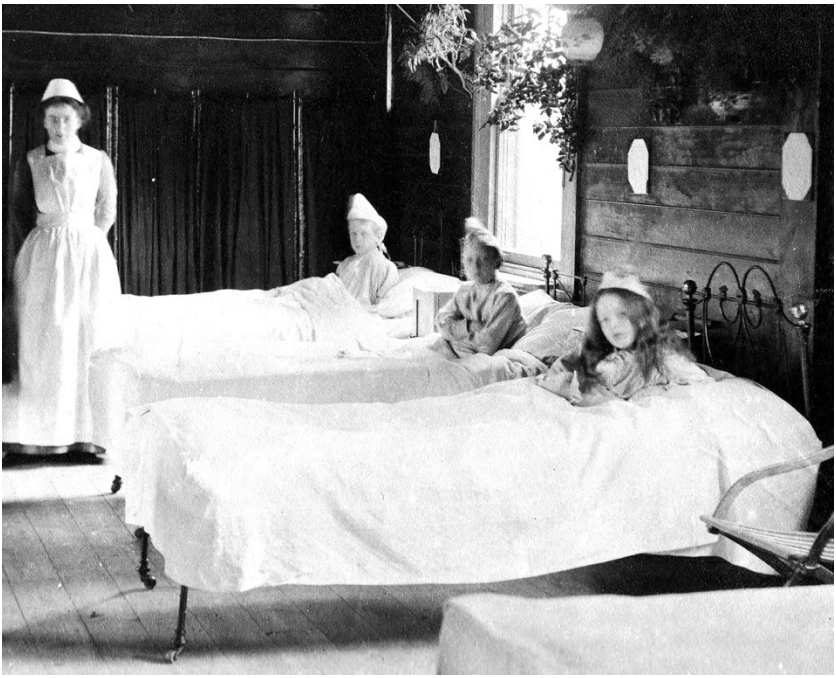
resin to school to hand around. Again, it was of no use to complain to our parents, who, as previously mentioned, thought that the teachers could do no wrong. Oh! Yes. Oh! Yes. It seems impossible in this day and age, but I can assure you that this would be confirmed by anyone who attended a boys school at this time. I should add that Mr Smith's sadistic attitude towards his pupils may have helped me to stand pain, when a few years later I fell into the hands of the Japanese.

During my final years at school I was fortunate to be taught by two young teachers who had recently finished University training and held the belief that it was better to educate through respect, than by force. Except for serious misconduct, they rarely used the cane. Mr Carter was an excellent teacher. I remember his explanations of the work of leading poets, and can today quote a number of these, which creep into my mind from time to time. His attitude to teaching was to involve the class. A complete turn around from our former teachers, who did not allow us to raise questions. We were now able to join the discussions, which gave us confidence. At last we realised that we had a brain.
Mr Hardwick, the other young teacher, taught maths. He introduced us to the finer points of geometry and in our last few weeks at school, attempted to put the principles of algebra into our heads. I doubt that any of the older teachers would have bothered to teach these subjects. They had entered their profession at a time when it was not thought necessary to teach anything beyond simple arithmetic to working-class children.

Hospitalisation - 1929

I was coming up to my thirteenth birthday. If only to illustrate the difference between health services in the 1920's and those of the National Health Service of today, I am recording my experience of becoming a patient in the then, fever hospital. I arrived home one day in the summer of this year to find that my young brother Stan had been admitted to this hospital suffering from the killer disease, diphtheria. Immunisation against which, and for that matter any other disease except smallpox, had not yet been discovered. Public Health Laws were in force to protect the public from the spreading of such dangerous diseases. Our house had to be completely disinfected. Every room was treated with anti-germ candles and mother had the daunting task of boiling all the clothes, blankets and curtains. Nothing which could contain germs escaped this treatment. No one, except the family, could enter the house. Antibiotics were not in existence. Without which the disease could easily spread. Public Health

Laws were strictly applied. It was not a case of 'will you' but an order 'YOU MUST'. Finally, all members of the family must have throat swab taken to ensure that they were not carrying the disease. My swab was found to be positive, which I could not believe. I was in my usual good health. To be told that I must go into hospital seemed ridiculous. Mother explained that this was necessary under the laid down law. Within an hour of hearing this, the fever ambulance arrived, covered in red crosses to indicate to those outside the house that it was not wise to get too close. Before leaving the house I was stripped of all clothing and a large red blanket was wrapped around me. On arrival at the hospital I was



taken to a ward where two nurses took me to a bed and tucked me in. The nurses were smartly dressed in the regulation uniform of the day. A light blue dress covered by a ‘whiter than white’ starched apron and a perfectly white head dress, made up to leave a trailing piece of material flowing at the back of the head. The ward sister overlooked by the matron, insisted upon cleanliness and obedience in all their staff. Woe betide any nurse who did not comply. Nurses were truly dedicated to their chosen profession. They had to be in order to cope with discipline imposed upon them by the ward sister.

There were about thirty beds in the ward. Fifteen on each outside wall. Each had to be perfectly aligned, to leave a large open space in the centre of the ward. Sister's large desk was at the far end of this space, in a position which enabled her to see everything going on in the ward. The critically ill patients, and those on the point of death, were within a few yards of her. She regularly visited their beds, to console them and their parents. Only the parents of the dangerously ill were allowed to visit the ward. Five nurses were on duty during the daytime, two of whom were trainees. The trainee nurses were responsible, amongst other duties, for the cleanliness and upkeep of the large area of open floor between the two lines of beds, which had to be cleaned and polished daily. Cleaners were not employed. The remaining three trained nurses had the task of caring for the bed bound patients, which included the maintenance of the thirty beds, which at all times were expected to be neatly tucked in and kept in perfect order. Everything in the ward was kept in a clean and orderly manner, which, I am sure, could not be said of the hospitals of today. I can only think that without the preventatives of immunisation and antibiotics, it was necessary to adopt as sterile an atmosphere as possible, to avoid cross infections between patients.

For myself, I received a large syringe full of some form of serum, within one hour of arrival, which affected my normal good health for the first day. After which I was moved to a side ward, where a school friend joined me, a day or so later. I then found out that I was the germ carrier, who had infected my mother, my younger brother Stan and a school friend. Each of whom were admitted to this hospital. Fortunately the germ I carried was a weak one and we were all discharged from hospital within a short time.

Electricity

It was at about this time that our house was converted from gas to electricity. The gas lights were removed and electric fittings put in their place. At the same time we were provided with one socket in each of the three downstairs rooms. We young ones were informed of the danger in touching bare wires. Gas was retained for the stove in the scullery. Gas lights, in the roads, had already been removed and replaced by new, higher posts, fitted with brighter electric lights. No longer did we have to carry matches around the house, to light the gas in the rooms after dark. Now, all we had to do was to use a switch to get a very much brighter light.

The Talkies

At the end of the 1920's I began to hear of a film which was on everyone's lips, 'Al Jolson' in the 'Singing Fool', which was the first talking picture. To hear of talking and singing in conjunction with the film was beyond our belief. Before this all films were silent, with written explanations at the

bottom of the screen. A pianist sat below the screen, endeavouring to fit in music to the theme of the film. The silent picture houses were dark and not too clean. Some were know as 'bug houses' and were rarely visited by adults. We were now in the era of the talkies. Cinemas were springing up everywhere for the entertainment-starved public, a number of whom had little interest in their homes, other than conversation and reading. The opportunity of a night out in a bright, well decorated new cinema, at a cost within their means, was a real attraction. People flocked to see and hear the new talking pictures, often having to queue for a seat until the uniformed commissioner allowed them to enter, as seats became available.

Wireless Sets

Wireless sets, though few and far between, had started to reach the home. I would estimate that about one in twenty homes contained one. I had the opportunity of seeing the forerunner of these, when I stayed at an uncle's house, whilst on holiday. He farmed a smallholding and was keen to obtain weather forecasts, particularly when he was ready to harvest his few acres of grain. Before the evening meal, each day, he placed a board on the table, to which was fixed a metal apparatus with two opposite points. One of which was moved towards the other by a finely operated screw. Putting on a pair of earphones and requesting everyone in the room to be silent, he moved the points until they were almost touching. This accomplished, he carefully adjusted the points, backwards and forwards, until he managed to tune in to the broadcast. This was the first form of wireless reception, which, I think, was

An 'advanced' crystal set with cat's whisker.

known as 'cats whiskers', or was it known as a 'whispers'?, which would have been a more apt name. It was to be two or three years before the first wireless sets became available for household use.

A year or so later I saw the ultimate, when I visited a friend's home. His father was one of the first radio enthusiasts and involved his son in this pursuit. My friend took me down into his cellar, where, spread over two large tables, were receiving and broadcasting sets, each of which had a number of dials, which with a lot of patience, were finely adjusted to reach others with the same interest. He tried to contact someone he knew in Scotland, without avail and said that he was, perhaps, a little early for contact. His father had a list of frequencies to enable him to chat to others with the same interest. His family must have been middle class, otherwise they could not have afforded such an expensive hobby. They lived in one of the large houses bordering the park. The fact that I, who came from a working class family, was able to visit their home is an example of the breakdown of class barriers.

The Tornado and the Airships

I cannot leave the year of 1929 without mentioning the tornado. A very unusual occurrence in this country. I was in the garden, which led down to railings separating us from the main Great Western Railway lines. At the other side of the wide railway track we overlooked a large factory, known as the B.S.A. (Birmingham Small Arms), which apart from armaments, manufactured a well known motor cycle. The weather had just cleared from a thunder storm and all was quiet, until I looked across the railway lines to see the corner of this large factory disintegrating and bricks flying in the air. I dashed into the house to tell those inside. Upon opening the door I was pushed forward by a very strong wind, which blew the living room door off its hinges and, as we later found, had damaged the brickwork at the back of the house. This violent wind lasted less than a minute, but caused an enormous amount of damage. The full force was said to be only a few yards in width. There were various degrees of damage to hundreds of houses in its path. Large trees were ripped from their roots, and left lying across paths and roads. Because of the preceding storm, there were few people outside at the time. Most of those who were outdoors and within its path were injured. I was told that only one person was killed.

During the same year, 1929, I was looking across the railway lines, to the corner of the B.S.A. factory, when an airship came into view. I was told that this was known as the R101. It was shaped like an enormous sausage, about twenty yards long and five yards in diameter. I was told that it could carry up to twenty people, which was more than any aeroplane could carry at that time. A short time later I saw the German built 'Graff Spee', which was not as large as the

British R101. Both had engines at the rear, which were not as loud as aeroplanes. From overheard conversations amongst the adults, it appeared that these airships were thought of as a future method of transport. Germany and ourselves were trying to perfect these. We did not know that aeroplanes capable of carrying more than one hundred people, would eventually be available for travel throughout the world.

The Great Depression - 1930

1930 was the year in which I attained fourteen years of age and left school to become an apprentice in the grocery trade. I am still in possession of my indentures of apprenticeship, in which I was known as the 'servant' and my employer as the 'master'. More about this later...

At the risk of repeating myself I must mention that this was the year of the beginning of the longest depression the world's stock markets had ever known, this depression was caused by a severe drop in share prices on the New York stock exchange, which reverberated throughout the world. Factories and businesses found themselves in financial difficulties, and were forced to either close down or impose short-time working upon their employees. Hundreds of thousands of men became either unemployed, or on short time working. Labour

exchanges were besieged by workers requiring relief. The Government was faced with great difficulty in finding the enormous finances required to provide for the unemployed. By the middle of this decade they had brought in a Bill, known as the 'Means Test', which required the unemployed to sell their possessions before unemployment benefit could be claimed.

During my second year of apprenticeship in the grocery trade, I was required by the manager of the shop in which I was working, to call upon bad debtors, in an endeavour to collect all, or part of these debts, which gave me a good insight into the plight of the unemployed. I did manage to collect a few pence here and there, but will always remember the unfortunate people I called upon.

One young mother I approached informed me that she could not pay, 'I haven't got a penny', she said. 'Come inside and see what they have left me with'. Rather than be discourteous, I entered the living room, where the only furniture was a well used table, with two chairs and two wooden boxes for the use of her children. I was shown into the pantry, where the only food I could see, was part of a loaf of bread and a small amount of margarine. Finally, I was requested to

‘see what’s left upstairs’, where there was no furniture, other than a bed in one room and a mattress on the floor of the second bedroom.

As I left the house she remarked, in a completely dejected voice, ‘don’t know how we will manage over the week-end. We don’t get any money from The Labour (Labour Exchange), until Tuesday’. Needless to say I forgot the purpose of my visit and left her with the greater part of my weekly pocket money.

I have quoted what could have been one of the worst cases of hardship, which may not be word perfect, but is absolutely true. I do know that the majority of families were on the 'bread line' during the first half of the 1930’s. The middle and upper classes, who had lost heavily on their stocks and shares, also had to tighten their belts. I remember the long queue of men, which stretched for about half a mile past our house, waiting patiently, three abreast, to get into the labour exchange. Hoping to get money, or work. Also my Dad arriving home one evening and going directly to the pantry, where he picked up a loaf of bread and some butter, which he took to a man standing at the doorstep. Returning, he remarked ‘You don’t know what some of them are going through’. These and other memories of the early 1930’s did not affect me as deeply at the time, I was a boy coming up to manhood and took it all as part of life. It is only when I put this on paper that I fully realise the extreme hardship which affected the majority of families at that time.

My Family

Our family was fortunate, we escaped the ravages of the depression which was due to the fact that we were rapidly becoming a grown up family. Gladys my sister, was away from home, helping an uncle who had recently lost his young wife, leaving him with two infant sons and a small farm to run. This left eight at home. Mother was of course fully employed in looking after us. Dad and four of the family were employed and bringing in money, leaving my younger brothers Stan and Roy still at school. Our jobs were reasonably safe. Dad and Bill worked for the railway, Les was subject to short-time working. He was now a qualified core maker with higher than average earnings and being a single man was able to cope with wage reductions when the Foundry was short of work. Cressy and myself, being young, were paid low wages and thus employable. Mother was better off than she had been throughout her married life. Gone were the days of hardship, she was now reaping the benefits of a large family. We had taken over this large house some

three or four years before, bringing with us the scant amount of furniture from our former small house in Hockley which, with a newly acquired sofa, was sufficient to furnish the living room. Mother had by now managed to furnish the sitting and dining rooms, which had been enhanced by the purchase of a piano in the sitting room, by Dad and the older members of the family, as a homecoming present after mother had a short stay in hospital. Mother was delighted, she now had a suitable room in which to entertain friends and visitors. The sitting room had the advantage of French windows, which opened on to the long narrow garden. This room was used for the occasional party, when the piano provided music, which Dad added to, by the use of a newly purchased accordion. Bill and Les were courting beautiful young ladies, who were shortly to become very welcome additions to the family. Florence, known as Flo, who was full of life and interesting conversation, was Bill's intended. Eva, Les's intended, was of a quieter nature but ready to join in any conversation. She was a highly certificated pianist, who, with a little persuasion was happy to provide entertainment.

Our Cars

A year or so later Dad bought his first car. A second hand American 'Essex', which was a classical car with a long bonnet and a running board, on which to step when entering. Inside were well upholstered seats and a polished wood dashboard containing all the dials including a cigar lighter and polished controls. The engine was quiet and powerful, in fact, it was almost up

to the standard of a Rolls Royce. Its big drawback was fuel consumption. Twenty or less miles per gallon, which was the reason that Dad was able to afford this sumptuous vehicle. Within six months he found it necessary to

replace this with a 'Singer Seven'. This replacement car was small with four uncomfortable seats and a push-back canvas roof through which the wind whistled. It was however, economical, travelling thirty or more miles to the gallon. With a lot of effort it would get us from points A to B providing that on steep hills one of the passengers alighted and walked to the top. Towards the

Ford Popular 1938

end of the 1930's Dad managed to buy a new 'Ford Popular', and we were again able to travel in comfort - except for the war years, when like so many others it stayed in the garage of our new home. Cars were a luxury to working class people, I would estimate that about one family in fifty owned one. I must stress that our affluence as a family was not common. We were amongst the few with the good fortune to have a number of wage earners in safe jobs. All able, on small incomes, to pay towards their keep.

A New Brother

By the third year of the 1930's Bill and Les were married and had left home, although they often popped in to see if we were 'all right'. On one such visit Les came in with a handsome young man who had blonde wavy hair and a healthy sun-tanned complexion whom he introduced as Charlie. This young man had the same Shropshire dialect as our parents. He came from our background village of Orton and conversed in a quiet manner often with a hint of humour in his voice. We all took an instant liking to him and were pleased when Mother agreed to put him up while he settled in to a job arranged for him by Les. Mother was pleased when she realised the true nature of his visit, which was an attraction to Cressy, who he had met while she was on holiday in Orton.

As a brother I had not noticed that Cressy was a pretty young lady who had already attracted a number of young men to visit our home. She was, and indeed still is, one who has a mind of her own which, being two years her junior I found out at a young age. Without realising it she was a kindred spirit to Emily Pankhurst, who directly after the First World War led the 'Women's Liberation' campaign. I remember during my early teens having a tea towel placed in my hands with the words 'I don't see why you can't do a bit of the washing up'. To me this was sacrilege. Boys did not do housework, my job was outdoors cutting sticks and breaking up coal for the fire. Mother, being a farmer's daughter also followed my beliefs. Cressy however was firm in her opinion that gender had nothing to do with this, where work was concerned. With her only sister Gladys away in the country she had five brothers to contend with, all of whom were taller than herself. She made up for this by making sure that her opinions were known and understood. On one occasion Les, the joker in the family, cried out 'watch her, watch her, she is bringing all her guns to bear'. This was a skit upon her name derived from the battle ship 'Cressy', which sank with her godfather on board during the First World War. Charlie was very attracted to Cressy and after coming to live in our house, he became as much a member of the family as any of us. They married during 1938. I have diverted from the happenings of the century to depict the nature of most large families at that time and in so doing, to explain the close relationship which existed in those who had experienced hardship in their younger days. On becoming wage earners they did their best to ensure that their Mothers and their family no longer had to live on just a day-to-day basis.

Work Days

Work in the 1930's was either strenuous, in factories and foundries, or as in my case, it had very long hours in a less exhausting employment. My apprenticeship in the grocery trade is an example of the latter. I had very little time in which to enjoy myself, having to work sixty hours or more per week, for which I received a standard wage. Overtime payment did not exist. My wage at 14 years of age was ten shillings per week. Around five pounds in today's value. On Saturdays we opened at 9 am and closed at 9 pm after which we had to take stock of all perishable foods. Butter, lard, cheese, bacon etc. None of this was wrapped and had to be carried in bulk to large scales at the back of the shop. Not until the manager was satisfied that all was done and that the shop was clean and tidy were we allowed to leave, usually around 11 pm – a fourteen hour day at 14 years of age. We dreaded the days on which deliveries

of food arrived at the shop, the two youngest boys at fourteen years of age were detailed to unload the van and move about fifteen hundred weight of goods up a flight of stairs, to a stock room above the shop. This included two-hundred-weight sacks of sugar and many very heavy packages, which we rolled or lifted one step at a time. It needed all our strength to accomplish this. On finishing we sank to the floor with sweaty bodies and aching muscles. It was surprising that we did not rupture ourselves, we did not complain or ask for extra help no matter how difficult it was as this was our work. We must do it, or be looked upon as useless. Another arduous task was to deliver groceries on heavily loaded bicycles, when it was necessary to stand on the pedals for most of each journey to keep moving.

After two years of this heavy work I was elevated to the position of counter assistant, when I was taught the art of extreme politeness to customers and of

A typical grocery store in the 1930's

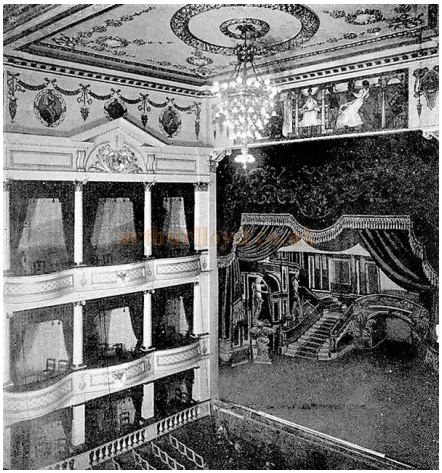
reminding them of goods they may have forgotten. Very much akin to the television comedy 'Open All Hours'. Customers were few and far between – very different to the supermarkets today. They rarely had money to spare and queuing was not necessary. An assistant was always available, as was a chair for them to sit on when they were placing an order. Money was scarce and we

treated customers like gold. Most housewives searched for the cheapest and picked up their food from shop to shop, wherever it was available at a lower price.

Thus after the required three years I was presented with a certificate saying that I had successfully completed my apprenticeship. My reward being an increase of four shillings in my weekly wage. Two years later, at nineteen years of age, I successfully applied for a post in the despatch department of a high class grocery firm situated in the city centre. Fortune was at last shining on me. This firm was owned by a Quaker family who were considerate to their employees, my hours of work were reduced from the previous 60 to 47 hours per week with an increase in my wages. My leisure hours were therefore increased, we finished work at 5.30 pm on weekdays and because their business was based on a delivery service to the better off, we did not have to work on Saturday afternoons. This was like heaven. Double the leisure time and extra money to spend.

Relaxation

Between fourteen and eighteen years of age my main time to relax was on Wednesday afternoons when the shop was closed and one or two hours after 8pm on Monday to Thursday during the week. Fridays and Saturdays were fully taken up with my employment. Sundays were free, but there was very little of interest to do. Whenever possible I met, and went around with a school-days friend, who now worked in a factory. We had little pocket money, and found interest by wandering about. Our main attraction being the city centre, where there were neon lights advertising various goods and plenty of people of all ages. Occasionally we spent sixpence of our hard earned pocket money to gain entrance to the 'Gods', above the circle in one of the theatres, particularly during the pantomime season. Like all young men we eyed up the girls, and sometimes stopped to chat to them. They were a different breed to those of today, and there was a certain amount of restraint between us. We had been kept apart during our school days, and in consequence treated them with respect. The city centre, and for that matter all areas of



the city, were law abiding. The police still had a firm hand on anyone disturbing the peace, and it was quite safe to walk the streets alone.

The Monarchy - 1936

This was an eventful year. King George V, who had been a much revered monarch and was on the throne throughout the First World War, died. His eldest son, Edward, took the throne as 'Edward the Eighth'. He was popular, particularly in Wales where, as the Prince of Wales, he had tried to ease the miners' lives. Throughout this year we started to hear of an American lady, twice divorced, known as Mrs Simpson, who was said to be a close friend of our new King. Some unkind words were being wafted around about her – a

seductress, a witch etc. No-one thought that King Edward would marry her, royalty was in a class of its own and we thought that members should marry into their own class, which included the royalty of other countries, daughters of earls, or dukes, etc. To marry a commoner seemed out of the question.

At the end of the year we were shocked to hear, through special editions of the newspapers and on the wireless, that King Edward VIII had abdicated from the throne and that his eldest brother George had taken his place as King George VI. It seemed that Edward was leaving the country to marry his heart's desire, Mrs Simpson. Edward VIII spoke to the nation on the wireless that evening, I cannot remember his words but I think he mentioned 'things beyond his control'. He also praised his brother George for taking his place and urged us to give him the support which he had enjoyed as our King. As most people know he married Mrs Simpson. They were given the title of Duke and Duchess of Windsor and lived a happy life together in Paris.

Our New King

We could not have had a better king than George VI who took the throne in a poor state of health, but with the considerable help from his wife, the present Queen Mother, did everything in his power to enhance the

The Coronation of King George VI - 12 May 1937

Royal Family and his People. His young daughters Elizabeth and Margaret were coached in the necessities of their new roles as princesses, which must have been difficult for children who had until then lived a quiet country life. King George would almost certainly have preferred his former life of freedom to that of the Monarchy, with constant calls upon him to attend and speak at many functions. He had a slight stutter and no doubt had to practice each speech before it was given. Queen Elizabeth, the present Queen Mother, provided him with great assistance at most public appearances, particularly during the war when they went walkabouts amongst the unfortunate bombed-out people of London. I remember him visiting the 48th Divisional Signals a few days before we left for France during January 1940. Shortly after dawn on this very cold morning we were marched over a thin layer of ice and snow to the parade ground where we shivered as we waited for this inspection. After a short time a car with a union jack fluttering on the bonnet, arrived. We then realised that it was the King who was to inspect us. Escorted by the senior Officers he walked along each rank. I noticed his face was thin and pale, which at first I thought was caused by the below freezing weather; afterwards I realised that his pallor was most likely due to his poor state of health. He gave us a short speech wishing us good luck, and left to visit each of the battalions and units of the Division. He could easily have delegated this exhausting task to others, but this was an example of his fortitude in dealing with matters which he thought of as his duty. He seemed always to put duty before his personal comfort. His greatest gift to the Nation was his daughter, who became Elizabeth the Second, who has given us all an example in dealing with so many problems in a quiet unruffled manner, for so many years.

Adolf Hitler

For some time, the media, newspapers, 'Pathé Gazette' at the cinemas and the wireless were often bearing news of an Austrian who had taken over the government of Germany. He was the leader of a party known as the Fascists, whose emblem, the 'Swastika' was adorned with an eagle. Films at the cinema showed regiments of German soldiers goose stepping as they passed a raised platform on which stood a rather short man with a small moustache dressed in a uniform with a large 'Swastika' on his jacket. He looked out of place receiving this honour. His popularity in Germany was caused by the fact that he and his party had turned mass unemployment in that country into full employment by the production of arms. The German armed forces were becoming a threat to the countries of Europe and to Britain in particular, with

its many colonies and dependencies throughout the world. A new German word 'Ersatz', meaning articles to replace the real thing had crept into our language, being used for sub-standard goods.

During 1936, I joined the Territorial Army. My friend Len had become engrossed with a pretty blonde girl whom he eventually married, and in consequence our evenings out became rare. This and the fact that I had always fancied the uniform, which I thought of as being a bit 'macho', caused me to decide upon this action. Dad certainly did not approve. Seeing me in uniform he remarked that I may soon regret this.

‘That Hitler could start another war you know,’ he said.

My spare time was now taken up with regular visits to the Royal Signals Barracks, learning the morse code, and the use of instruments used to relay messages. I also cured my loneliness, making many new friends.

The Spanish Civil War - 1936

1936 heralded the start of civil war in Spain. A man called Franco, who had leanings towards fascism, and had a large following, set up his movement against the Spanish Government. A number of British young men, some of whom I knew, left this country to become involved in this full scale war. Most were against fascism – or perhaps they just wanted to be involved. They need not have bothered, it would not be long before they were fighting for their own country.

'Guernica' by Pablo Picasso,
illustrating the horrors of the Spanish Civil War

Nineteen Thirty-Seven

This was an eventful year. The most important event for me was that I met a lovely young lady, who eventually agreed to marry me. Without her, I would not have survived into my old age. I had recently returned from a summer camp with the 48th Divisional Signals, and was walking along the Coventry Road with a friend from the Signals, when we saw two young ladies. Liking what we saw we crossed over the road to speak to them. They treated us with some reserve, but I was so taken up with the one whose name was 'Floss'

(Florence) that I held on and chatted so hard that I managed to get her to agree to meet me during the following week.
Upon walking away I said to my friend in an excited manner, 'That's the one! If she will have me'.

I was very disappointed when she failed to turn up on the appointed day and asked my friend to walk with me in the same area a week later. Fate was with me when we saw the same two young ladies walking back from the cinema and we repeated our performance of crossing the road to meet them. This time I was promised that she would turn up, if I arranged a time and date. She kept the appointment and from that time we started to walk out together. I am fairly sure that at first she had difficulty in deciding between myself and her friend. Fate stepped in. I won and in doing so gained a lifetime of love and caring. Amongst which were two sons who, owing to her perfect guidance and loving attention, gained the impetus to qualify for professional posts and have done well in life. She is with me now. Caring and looking after me in my old age.

During this year I heard from Mother that she had been visited by a young man from a firm called "Hoover" who demonstrated a machine known as a Vacuum cleaner. She did not buy one but thought they could be useful, this was the first machine to provide assistance to the overworked housewife. Until then everything had to be done by hand, wall to wall carpets were few and far between. Most homes had an odd square of carpet in their best room, which left the outer edges exposed to the floor. Some people had nothing but a few rugs to cover their floors. New aids in the home were available, but did little to reduce the work. The first washing powder, known as "Rinso", replaced soda, soap and borax on wash days. "Mansion", a polish for furniture eased the work a little.

Unemployment had reduced to the point when few men needed to visit the employment exchange. Gone were the long queues of unemployed. The "Birmingham Small Arms" factory across the railway lines at the bottom of our back garden had been quick-started into full employment by the need to produce arms to offset the powerful German Army, as had most factories throughout this country. Working men and women were now paid an adequate wage, though women's wages were significantly lower than those of men, who were considered to be stronger and more reliable than women. More families could now afford their own transport. Cars or motorcycles with or without sidecars were within the family budget. About one in twenty families now had this facility which enabled them to get out into the countryside. All motorised

vehicles now required a licence, as did their drivers although it was not yet necessary to pass a driving test.

Nineteen Thirty-Eight

Floss and I were going out together. She had lost her mother at the latter end of 1937. Her father who, like herself, was devastated, met and married a widow who lived on the outskirts of the city. I think he thought that this would ease the burden on Floss, his eldest child, who had a teenage brother and infant sister to care for. During this year Cressy and Charlie married and moved

Len with Floss and her step sister Peggy in the back garden of Floss's dad's house in Birmingham c.1938

to a house on a new estate just over the city boundary. My parents liked their house, which had a garage, and decided to buy one in the same road. The house we moved to was newly built in a very desirable area. Mother was delighted to have modern facilities and Dad was now able to garage his new 'Ford Popular'. One decade before this the thought of a working class man owning his own house was almost unheard of.

This created a problem for Floss and myself, who until our parents moved had been within walking distance of each other. We moved to houses situated on opposite borders of the city, some ten miles apart. I took on the exhausting task of cycling the twenty miles return, three nights of the week and some weekends to see her. Occasionally Floss, who could not ride a bicycle, spent some of her very low wages on travelling by bus to relieve me of this task. We solved this problem when we became engaged at the latter end of the year. Like all engaged couples, we started to look for a house. New housing estates were sprouting up on the outskirts of the city with houses for sale at £370 to £450, together with large new council house estates encouraged by the Chamberlain family, whose aim as politicians, was to clear as many as possible of the Victorian back-to-back houses, which had become slums. We looked at our finances and decided to try to buy one of the cheaper ones, built in less desirable areas. Floss could not manage to save on her pitiful wages as a machinist in the clothing industry. In consequence I started to save in earnest by putting away two shillings and six pence per week. We did not know that within a year things were to change with the outbreak of war.

Public transport had changed since the 1920's. Trams had been superseded by buses. Starting on most routes by the introduction of trolley buses, which were free of the tramlines and could load and unload at the pavement instead of the middle of the road. They were, however, still reliant upon electricity from the overhead cables, formerly used by the trams. A few years later the cables became redundant when petrol driven buses, already in service on some journeys, came into use on all routes. Petrol must have been more expensive than electricity – fares were increased.

The Second World War

1938 Hitler's jack-booted troops, which had marched into the Rhineland two years earlier now took over Austria and Czechoslovakia. He must have been besotted with the power of the German army and did not think of the concern that this would cause throughout Europe.

1939 The final straw came when German troops began to concentrate on the border of Poland. The British Government found it necessary to warn Hitler that to invade Poland would cause a declaration of war with Germany. Our Prime Minister, Mr Chamberlain, who was a peacemaker, visited Hitler to inform him personally of the drastic consequences of invading Poland, which would change the balance of power in Europe. He returned with a smile on his face, and the words, 'Peace in our Time'. Those who remembered the hardships of the First World War, wanted to believe this but the majority had their doubts. At the latter end of August German troops invaded Poland causing Britain to forward an ultimatum to them demanding a withdrawal within one week. After which, unless they conformed, we would declare war on Germany. This was ignored and a declaration of war was made on the 3 September 1939. The British public were not surprised. They took it in their stride. The threat of war had been on the cards for the past three years and to most it was necessary to offset the German menace. Our Government had started to prepare for this. Conscription of eighteen-year-old men had come into force during 1937. The production of arms had been increased at about the same time. Civilian gas masks were available and were issued to everyone, including babies. Fortunately, gas warfare was avoided by the Germans. Children living in large industrial areas, considered as targets for enemy bombers, were evacuated to country areas. Sand bags were filled and placed against important buildings in the town centres. Many businesses turned to the production of arms.

At the time I was still working in the high class grocery despatch department. I had been prepared for war for two years already, since Germany took over Austria and Czechoslovakia. Our well-off customers started 'panic buying', instead of one tin it was a case of tins of various foods. We had to work overtime to satisfy the demand. This continued throughout the year before the declaration of war. The pantries of the better off must have been bulging before the declaration was made. No one expected Germany to withdraw its troops from Poland. Full mobilisation of all men for military service was ordered, and notice was made to all former conscripts, reservists, territorials etc. to

immediately report to their respective barracks. With a feeling of pride, not realising the horrors to come, I pulled my shoulders back, said goodbye to my colleagues at work and rushed off home to don my uniform. I then reported to my nearby barracks where I mingled with my comrades, all of whom were in an excited mood and happy to leave their place of work for a taste of the unknown. Mother, who knew the consequences of war, was very concerned. She had five sons and I was the first to go. Charlie, who I have already mentioned was considered as a member of the family, had former military training. He was soon called up, leaving Cressy, who lived a few houses away and her infant daughter Janet, alone. It was not long before Stan, my younger brother, was called up to serve as a fireman in the Royal Air Force. My mother did take some solace from the fact that Bill, Les and Roy were in reserved occupations, needed for the production and movements of arms. Although they did not fully escape from the rigours of war, when enemy bombers carried out night raids in and around the city. I remember those raids, when I was on leave during the winter of 1940. German bombers were targeting a nearby industrial site and the sounds of exploding bombs and anti-aircraft guns deafened the ears. The bombers arrived at around 7 pm and did not finish until after 2 am.

We sheltered from the bombing in the pantry under the stairs, which was considered to be the safest place in the house. Dad took up his place in the garden, making sure that nothing fell on the house. He called me out when a batch of incendiary bombs landed in the garden bursting into flames upon impact with the ground. My job was to cover the flames with sand, a pile of which he had available for this purpose. We managed to extinguish these with no further problems that night, and he managed to get about five hours sleep before reporting for work the following day. The casual way in which everyone accepted these bombings, as part of life, astonished

me. Such words as ‘Oh, here they are again,’ and ‘I wonder how long they will be at it tonight?’ No-one mentioned the dangers of these raids.

The outbreak of war caused Floss and myself problems. We had thought of getting married during September, but now thought that buying a house would leave Floss living alone. Cressy came to the rescue, by offering us a home with her, now that Charlie was away on active service. We gladly took up this offer. Our marriage took place during October 1939, and Floss went to live with Cressy until the end of the war. I had just three days leave for our marriage and returned to find that there were rumours of an impending move in the near future. The Signals were now stationed at Chilton Hall, near Hungerford, Hertfordshire.

Ours was a spartan type of living, my section was billeted in the stables where two other men and I were allocated a stall in which to settle down. We had

nothing other than our ground sheets between us and the cobbled floor, until someone started to notice that this could affect our health. It was October and there was no heating in these cold stables. Firstly we were issued with palisades to fill with straw and later metal beds to keep us off the ice cold floor. The night of comfort was reached when, during November, a few paraffin heaters were issued to add to the heat from our bodies. We would have been far better off as

prisoners in H.M. Prisons. At least they had adequate heating and a bed with a mattress. They also had decent food, which could not be said for us. Our cooks were men with a background of factory work, who tried without success to provide meals in an outdoor kitchen, with nothing other than an awning over their heads to keep off the late autumn rains. Around one hundred men squelched their way to this cook house through a sea of mud to collect their food. An attempt was made to improve this problem by the use of duck boards, which sank into the mud, whilst we continued to walk in the mire. November came in with ice cold weather, which dried the mud and we were able, at last, to avoid the necessity of cleaning our boots after each meal. Our meals were nothing to write home about, poorly cooked, and almost cold by the time we had collected them. We then negotiated our way through the mud to a large unheated marquee, where we ate. We did not complain; this after all, was active service, during which we were expected to accept any discomfort put upon us.

France - 1940

A few days after the King's visit, during January 1940, we were ordered to pack our belongings and parade the next morning ready to march to Hungerford railway station. We had already guessed that our destination was France. The following morning, without regrets, we marched in a long column, each of us carrying about half a hundred weight on our backs, out of the discomforts of the Chilton Hall out-houses. That day we travelled via Dover to Le Havre where we boarded a train to a small French town known as Yvetot. We stayed overnight at Yvetot, in an unheated, unused factory, with an ice-cold concrete floor, on which we slept that night. Fortunately, we were paid in French currency, shortly after our arrival, and were able to visit the warm, cosy cafes in the town. There we were supplied with alcoholic drinks, needed to warm our bodies, before attempting to sleep on the ice-cold floor of the factory, where throughout that night we alternated between shivering and short bouts of sleep. We were relieved at dawn, when we were supplied with mugs of hot tea. I am sure that this hot drink saved us from hypothermia.

The weather outside had not risen above freezing point, when after an inadequate breakfast, we were loaded onto waiting army lorries, to travel about one hundred kilometres to a small mining town known as Henin Lietard, which was near Lille and the Belgian border. We stayed in this town until the end of April. The Weather remained very cold until the end of March when we found that the roads, which we thought were tar-macadam, were cobbled and realised

that they had been covered in black ice throughout the three months' stay. No wonder that the Germans had delayed their invasion of Belgium until the Spring when the roads became passable to move tanks and transport.

During April, I was lucky to be selected for leave. I left for England and was warmly greeted by all at home. Floss and I went for a break to Weston-super-Mare, which was very enjoyable, until towards the end of the week when we read in the newspapers that the Germans had invaded Belgium and that fierce fighting between them and the French and British Forces, was in full swing. This was real war, not the 'phoney' one, which had existed until then. As ordered, I immediately returned home, with Floss, to change into uniform and say my goodbyes. I returned to France together with others who had been on leave, via Dover and Boulogne, where I found a lot of confusion. We were eventually put on a train which took us in the dark of night to a station not known by any of us, which was as far as the driver wanted to go. When we asked the few station staff for directions they pointed to the road outside, from this we assumed that we had to walk.

Refugees

We walked until dawn with our kits on our backs. Passing refugees lying in the ditches. Some were rounding up their horses and getting them harnessed to carts for the day's travelling – to where they did not know. 'As far from the Germans as they could get'. Babies were crying, clutched closely to their mothers, and children climbed out of the ditches to play. Shortly after dawn three German Stuka dive bomber planes began to machine gun the unfortunate refugees. This, I heard later, was in an endeavour to clear the roads for German tanks and army vehicles. So this was war! Jumping into ditches and getting as low as possible to avoid the machine-gunning. Civilians and soldiers alike all trying to avoid the rain of bullets and the possibility of death to themselves and their children. A far cry from the bravado of swaggering around in uniform, displayed at the outbreak of war.

After a short rest we continued to walk in the opposite direction to that of the refugees. Knowing that our troops would be found somewhere facing the German forces. Later that morning we saw and stopped a British army lorry, the driver of which gave us directions to an army holding unit which collected British troops who had lost their regiments. We managed to find the holding unit, arriving in an exhausted state and were provided with soup and bread washed down with a mug of tea. The food was very much appreciated, apart from the scraps of food in our haversacks we had not eaten since leaving the boat at Boulogne. Upon requesting directions to our units we were told to look out for any lorry which had our divisional sign on it. I cannot remember my sign now, but after one night at the holding unit I saw it on a visiting lorry and jumped into the back asking the driver to drop me off when he got to the signals.

Retreat to Dunkirk

After a short journey he stopped at a field gate shouting out 'Signals'. I quickly jumped off, opened the gate and walked across the field to find my comrades who greeted me with a few ribald remarks as to where I had been hiding whilst the heat was on. They had moved from Henin Lietard immediately after hearing of the German invasion of Belgium and taken up a position near to our Infantry. Being Divisional Signals, this was far enough from the fighting to escape most of the gunfire. After a few days they had retreated

to this field. A very peaceful position in an ideal rural area, where they were out of hearing of the battle. I remember a herd of cattle in the field most of whom were in a bad state from lack of milking. Most of us were town bred and had little knowledge of this function. Those who did, myself included, relieved a few cows mainly by squirting the milk on to the ground whilst filling a few mess tins. The farmer and his family were no doubt amongst the many refugees on the roads.

The following morning we were ordered to pack our kits and be ready to move during the afternoon. Thus began a three day journey in our lorries and wireless vans to Dunkirk. Our first night was spent in an apple orchard with a French artillery battery, who also chose this orchard for the camouflage provided by the trees. The 'Luftwaffe' (German Air Force) who had far more planes than ourselves, had already laid waste to all our airfields and gained mastery of the air. The French Air Force was made up of outdated planes and our up-to-date 'Spitfires' and 'Hurricanes' were few in numbers. The powers-that-be must have seen the writing on the wall and in consequence had kept most of them at home in Britain. Without them we would almost certainly have lost 'The Battle of Britain'. Not knowing this, most of the army were continually saying 'Where is the bloody Air Force?'

At the time we looked upon the French army and Air Force as useless. Their army still used horses for the transport of field guns and heavy equipment, much as they did in the First World War and their air force was equipped with out-of-date aeroplanes which were no match for the sleek lines and speed of the German 'Messerschmitt' fighter planes. Their planes must have been shot down in the first few days of the fighting. We did not see any French fighter planes and only one British 'Hurricane' which took on the impossible task of attacking three Messerschmitts. After a short dog fight the Hurricane was shot down, but not without damaging one of the German planes which left with smoke trailing from its wings. The Hurricane pilot must have been either extremely brave or out of his mind to attempt this three-to-one fight. As for the poorly equipped French forces, I think that the between-the-wars economy of France was so low that they could not find the money to bring their forces up-to-date.

The French artillery battery hitched up their horses to their field guns and moved out early the following morning. After a snack breakfast we signals also left the orchard having been split into three sections with an officer in charge of each. Our officer took us on a day long trip around country lanes to avoid being seen by German planes. He was continually referring to his map and keeping as

close as possible to the main road leading to Dunkirk. We spent our first night sleeping in the outhouses of a deserted farmhouse. On the second day we heard that German tanks were close by and kept our ears open for their engines. When engines were heard we hid in hedges until they had moved on. Our only armoury against tanks was an 'anti-tank' rifle which was about as effective as a peashooter. Our job was to get to our rendezvous without being taken prisoners, or risking death. During the afternoon, when it was thought that we were out of reach of the enemy we turned our vehicles on to the main road to Dunkirk passing the Menin Gate at Ypres where there were many memorials to the dead of the First World War. Avoiding the ravages of an aerial attack we eventually reached the small town of Berges (not to be confused with Bruges), which was a number of kilometres away. At Berges we set up a signal office in a large Bastille under the Hotel De Ville (Town Hall) where we supported the Divisional Headquarters staff by passing messages to the infantry and artillery, who were holding back the Germans, to allow our troops to retreat to the sea. It was in this dungeon that I got my first experience of real warfare. The enemy were attacking Berges with shells and bombs. We could hardly hear each other speak over the sound of continual explosions. Our fairly safe underground haven had grills in the ceiling overlooking the outside pavement, in which we placed lighted candles to find out how long it would take for the outside bombardment to blow them out. We rarely got beyond ten before they were extinguished. I occasionally climbed the concrete steps leading out to the road to see the effect of the bombardment upon the town buildings, most of which were old, from the Georgian and pre-Georgian periods. It was on these steps that I saw an example of the guards bravery and discipline. It was not necessary to see their badges to define their Regiments. These tall men marched in single file, dressed in well fitted khaki battle dress with their haversacks high on their backs and rifles facing forward at a regulation angle. They could have been marching at a Trooping of the Colour as they went forward in a perfectly straight line through the shrapnel from the artillery shells with an odd man or so dropping wounded to the ground. Without hesitation they stepped over the wounded leaving them to be attended to by a group at the end of the column. These were pre-war fully trained guards who, like automatons, carried out orders without hesitation. We Signals could by no means have obeyed orders in such a manner.

On the next day we moved out of the dungeon to a field on the outskirts of the town, where, to our surprise, we were ordered to destroy all our equipment. This was a shock. We knew that things were bad and that we were in full retreat, but to destroy all our signalling equipment sounded like surrender. Without this

equipment our purpose of passing messages to and from Headquarters was gone. Having carried out this order, including demobilising all our vehicles, we marched out that night on our way to Dunkirk, some ten kilometres away. After marching to within three kilometres of this town we no longer needed

directions. Dunkirk was ablaze with smoke and flames reaching up to the sky. We were relieved when we realised that we were not entering this hell hole and turned right to the less dangerous sands of Bray dunes, about one kilometre further on, which we reached during the middle of the night. In an absolutely exhausted state we each scraped a hole in the sand and lay down to sleep the remainder of the night away. At dawn we were awakened by the explosion of shells from German guns, and bombs. Machine guns from low flying enemy planes, added to this peril. Fortunately the holes we had made in the sand kept most of us safe.

The weather was perfect as we looked out on to a calm blue sea where a number of small boats were bobbing up and down on the tide a short distance from the shore. We were told to walk out into the sea to board any vessel we could find. My friend Tom and myself joined a line of men walking into the water. Both of

us could swim, and in consequence were not afraid of the sea. As the water started to reach our shoulders we reached a comrade who had to stop wading because he could not swim. We lifted and pulled him to a long boat, from a destroyer which had been rowed out to us by a lone sailor. He controlled us, with the aid of one of his paddles, to ensure that we did not overload the boat. The moment he thought the boat was full, he pushed off from the line of waiting men, and rowed us out to the destroyer, where we climbed aboard using rope ladders, which were hanging over the sides.

As we gained the deck of the destroyer “HMS Worcester”, we were met by a naval officer and two ratings who started to take our rifles and throw them over the side into the sea. Not without a struggle however, this was sacrilege. The first lesson we had on entering the army was based upon the importance of our rifle, which was 'our friend and protector'. We had to be told continually that the Captain’s orders were to embark men, not equipment. Immediately after losing our rifles, we found a vacant space on deck into which we dropped down to rest. We were a motley crowd, mostly without uniforms or with only parts of them. Some had nothing on but pants, the remainder having been discarded into the sea, in our effort to reach the small boats. When the sea was only a few inches from the deck the destroyer pulled up its anchors and got on its way out

of this very dangerous area, in and around Dunkirk, where enemy planes were constantly attacking the ships. We were lucky, a few flew over the ship but did not attack us. Their main aim was to destroy the quay at Dunkirk.

As we lost sight of the shore, tea was sent up from the galley, which was very much appreciated. We had not had any drink or food for at least twenty-four hours. Some thought that we were being taken to the South of France to continue the fight, but the fact that we no longer had our rifles soon quashed that rumour. I spent most of the journey sleeping off my complete exhaustion, but do remember that the sea was like a mill pond, hardly a wave in sight, which was fortunate as the overloaded destroyer would almost certainly have capsized in rougher seas. Thanks to the lone sailor who braved the likelihood of being blown out of the sea, we arrived at Dover early in the afternoon. Everything was hustle and bustle in the docks with military personnel handing out items of clothing where necessary and getting us in groups to march, as well as we were able, to the railway station to board a waiting train which was taking us to a tented field somewhere in the country.

The train made a number of stops at stations en-route where we were welcomed by ladies, the majority of whom were members of the WVS (Woman's Voluntary Service), who greeted us with tea and sandwiches, which in our state of semi starvation, were very much appreciated. I remember thinking, why were we being so well looked after? We were the vanquished not the victors. We certainly did not think that we deserved this fuss. I had heard, however, that our rapid retreat from the Belgian border was caused by circumstances, not force. The well equipped German army very soon overcame the Belgians on the left flank of the British expeditionary force, leaving the left of our line open to the enemy. The French forces retreated to the south leaving our right flank open to the Germans. This left the rear of our force open to the enemy, which made it quite easy for them to surround us. The only alternative was to cover our rear by a retreat to the sea, the nearest point of which was Dunkirk. Our army was ordered to retreat to that point with all haste – true or false? I do not know. Being just an ordinary soldier I was not aware of the decisions of the high command, all I knew was that I was pleased to get out of that dangerous situation, as were most of my comrades. The heroes were the naval personnel, and the owners of the hundreds of small boats who risked their lives to pick us out of the sea.

LA VILLE DE DUNKERQUE

à Leonard Breakwell
Royal Corps of Signals

En mémoire des Combats de Mai et Juin 1940

Le Maire,

CLAUDE PROUVOYEUR

Association Nationale des A. C de Flandres-Dunkerque 40

1940 Dunkirk Veterans Association

Amicale des Anciens de Marine Dunkerque

LIVRE D'OR N° 46808

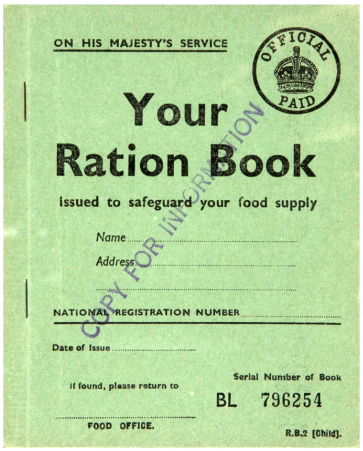
Our Finest Hour

The German army had now gained control over all of western Europe, except Britain. Everyone realised that this was a very dangerous situation. Our Navy was superior to that of the enemy, and as expected the Germans decided to use their air power in an endeavour to gain control of Britain. Squadron after Squadron of bomber planes crossed the Channel to attack the southern area of England. It was now that we realised the need to keep our air force at home. Every serviceable fighter plane, Hurricanes and Spitfires flew from their airfields to fight off the German squadrons which were often protected by enemy fighters. The German fighters had the problem of running out of fuel, and were unable to stay with their bomber planes for long before having to return to their bases in France. A number did not return, having to ditch in the English Channel through shortage of fuel. Thus the bombers had to rely upon their own fire power as the RAF fighters screamed down from the sky to attack them. It resembled a football match, with the wireless announcing the daily score. ‘Germans forty. British twenty downed for thirty German bombers’. We hardly thought of the sacrifices by RAF pilots, many of whom were losing their lives, or being wounded and severely burned, as they ejected from their stricken planes. It was no exaggeration when Winston Churchill named them 'The Few'. These pilots came from all walks of life but in the main were young men from Colleges and Universities who took up the challenge of replacing the unfortunate pilots shot down, and wounded in the vital task of destroying the enemy planes. Receiving only the minimum of training, they took to the air to destroy as many enemy planes as possible, before, as was often the case, they themselves were shot down or severely burnt and wounded.

Manufacturers of aircraft stepped up their production to the absolute maximum to replace the lost aircraft, making it possible for the RAF to maintain the availability of fighter planes. At the end of July 1940 the German Luftwaffe (Airforce) realised that they could no longer afford their losses of planes and trained air crews. Unlike their early success in France they had learned that Britain was a hard nut to crack. Daytime raids ceased and were replaced by night raids. Just as Francis Drake and Company had destroyed the Spanish Armada, the RAF fought off the German menace with the self-sacrifice of many young men. The 'Battle of Britain' was ended.

The Heroic British Public

As already mentioned, it was now the civilians turn to endure the power of the German raids during the long winter nights of 1940-42, when many homes were left in ruins, and people living in the target areas killed and wounded. The public took this with great fortitude, losing their sleep at night, and turning up for work the following day. To them it was a consequence of war which could not be avoided. The answer to the raids was the breakthrough in direction finding which guided our night fighter planes to the accurate positions of the enemy. When the Luftwaffe lost so many aircraft the night raids were abandoned and by the end of 1942 people could again sleep in their beds at night. They now had only the shortage of rations to contend with. Everyone had a ration book which had to be used when buying food. The allowed quantities, mainly in ounces, were so small that mothers often went without the vital foods to provide for their children.


ON HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE

OFFICIAL PAID

Your Ration Book

Issued to safeguard your food supply

Name .....

Address .....

.....

NATIONAL REGISTRATION NUMBER .....

Date of Issue .....

If found, please return to .....

.....

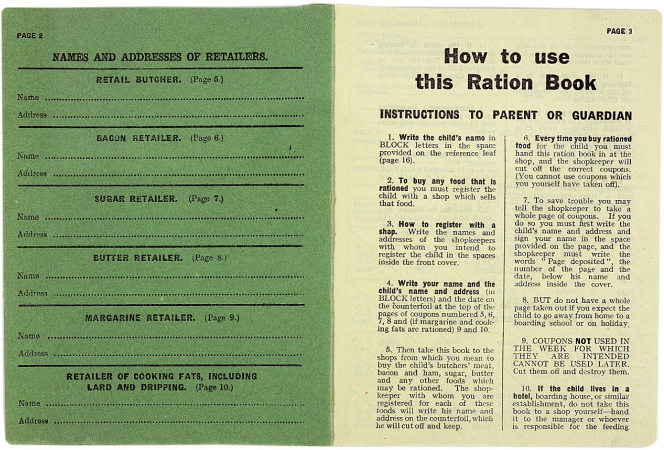
FOOD OFFICE.

Serial Number of Book

BL 796254

R.B.2 [Child].

COPY FOR INFORMATION


PAGE 2

NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF RETAILERS.

RETAIL BUTCHER. (Page 5.)

Name .....

Address .....

BACON RETAILER. (Page 6.)

Name .....

Address .....

SUGAR RETAILER. (Page 7.)

Name .....

Address .....

BUTTER RETAILER. (Page 8.)

Name .....

Address .....

MARGARINE RETAILER. (Page 9.)

Name .....

Address .....

RETAILER OF COOKING FATS, INCLUDING LARD AND DRIPPING. (Page 10.)

Name .....

Address .....

PAGE 3

How to use this Ration Book

INSTRUCTIONS TO PARENT OR GUARDIAN

1. **Write the child's name** in BLOCK letters in the space provided on the reference leaf (page 16).

2. **To buy any food that is rationed** you must register the child with a shop which sells that food.

3. **How to register with a shop.** Write the names and addresses of the shopkeepers with whom you intend to register the child in the spaces inside the front cover.

4. **Write your name and the child's name and address** (in BLOCK letters) and the date on the counterfoil at the top of the pages of coupons numbered 5, 6, 7, 8 and (if margarine and cooking fats are rationed) 9 and 10.

5. Then take this book to the shops from which you mean to buy the child's butchers' meat, bacon and ham, sugar, butter and any other foods which may be rationed. The shopkeeper with whom you are registered for each of these foods will write his name and address on the counterfoil, which he will cut off and keep.

6. **Every time you buy rationed food** for the child you must hand this ration book in at the shop, and the shopkeeper will cut off the correct coupons. (You cannot use coupons which you yourself have taken off).

7. To save trouble you may tell the shopkeeper to take a whole page of coupons. If you do so you must first write the child's name and address and sign your name in the space provided on the page, and the shopkeeper must write the words "Page deposited", the number of the page and the date, below his name and address inside the cover.

8. BUT do not have a whole page taken out if you expect the child to go away from home to a boarding school or on holiday.

9. COUPONS **NOT** USED IN THE WEEK FOR WHICH THEY ARE INTENDED CANNOT BE USED LATER. Cut them off and destroy them.

10. **If the child lives in a hotel**, boarding house, or similar establishment, do not take this book to a shop yourself—hand it to the manager or whoever is responsible for the feeding

Wartime Days

At the time of the 'Battle of Britain' the army had been spread out in positions adjacent to the coast to offset the possibility of an invasion by the German army. The news often mentioned the concentration of their troops in the French Channel ports. This threat continued throughout the remainder of 1940 and 1941. The Corps of Signals were supplied with radios, one for every signal office which was tuned in to the BBC. The signalmen on duty had to listen for a given code word, which we knew was an invasion signal

and had to be reported immediately to the Officer in Charge. Fortunately this code word was never heard. The Germans must have decided that invasion was too risky, our navy was a great threat to them.

Following our return from France my division was broken up and we were posted to other divisions. I was sent to a number of them, before eventually landing up in one which was preparing to be sent overseas. Floss and I took the opportunity of my eighteen months in England to be together as much as possible. I found accommodation for her near each camp, to enable me to spend my free time in her company. We made friends while staying there, and this was a happy time for us. Our joy at the birth of our eldest son, John during September 1941 was marred by the impending overseas embarkation of my Division. I had to leave them when my baby son was six weeks old and did not see either of them again for four years. I did, however, have the consolation of knowing that they were left in good hands. My mother lived only a few houses away from Cressy, with whom Floss was staying, and my whole family kept a loving eye on them.

Our ‘Cook’s Tour’ - 1941

During late September 1941, my Division moved to Liverpool where we were loaded onto ships to join a convoy travelling to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where we were transferred to American ships with an American Navy escort. This was the first American convoy, taken over two months before Pearl Harbour and thus two months before America joined the war.

Our route was Trinidad, West Indies, Cape Town, South Africa and India where we stayed for a few weeks until we re-joined the same ships in Bombay to sail for Singapore – a real Cook's tour, provided by his Majesty's Government. Most

Likely on the 'Lend Lease Agreement' arranged between Mr Churchill and the American President. Our Division of more than a thousand men arrived in Singapore on 30 January 1942 to join the British and Australian Forces who were facing a rapidly advancing Japanese army in Malaya, in a forlorn attempt to hold this strategically sited British Colony. I say forlorn because it was virtually impossible in a situation where there was no air or sea support. The only Units of the Navy, the battle ships 'Prince of Wales' and 'Hood' had been sunk by the Japanese and the only planes in use by the RAF were a few out of date bi-planes which were completely outclassed by the up-to-date Japanese 'Zero' fighter planes. The obvious outcome was the capitulation of all our forces to the Japanese army two weeks after our arrival in Singapore.

The Fall of Singapore - 1942

From the moment that we heard that we were to surrender to the Japanese, following the battle of Singapore, we realised that this was going to be no picnic. I was, at that time, a member of the 18th Divisional Signals, working in the Headquarters Signal Office and was one of the first to hear this terrible news. My friends, John, a blond, seriously minded young Lancashire man, and Bill, a Welshman who was a bit of a comedian in his dry way, were sitting outside the Signal Office, under the eaves of a bungalow. When I came off duty I joined them and imparted this drastic news.
John said, 'How can we? I thought the Japs didn't take prisoners.'
Bill said, 'God help us. We can only wait and see.'
'Once we hand over our arms,' I said, 'we are at their mercy. They could put machine guns all round us and mow us down.'

We discussed ways of avoiding such a situation, but could find no solution. We knew that there was no escape. This was an island and every available boat had already been taken to evacuate civilians and key personnel, including women and children. It seemed that we must await our fate.

I am sure that we all had very little sleep that night, wondering what would happen to us when we laid down our arms, at the appointed time, 4pm the following day.
Our thoughts were mainly on home and families. Mine certainly were. The lines of a poem by Sir Henry Newbolt, entitled 'He fell among thieves', kept going through my head.
This poem described the thoughts of an Englishman who fell into the hands of thieves, in the foothills of the Himalayas. They announced that he was to be beheaded at dawn the next day. He dreamed of home, 'The magnolias creeping in at the windows wide' and of his family going about their daily business, in a manner very close to my own thoughts.

The deafening sounds of battle continued throughout that night and until the afternoon of the following day, when the ear piercing whistle and crash of shells and mortars, mixed will the continuous rattle of machine guns, gradually subsided. By 4pm, apart from the sound of occasional small arms fire, an eerie silence replaced the continual sounds of battle of the past few days. We had been kept busy during the day, passing messages to Brigades and my friends agreed with me that it was difficult to concentrate on the Morse code, with the terrible thoughts of capture in our minds. That evening was spent in talking

over our desperate situation. Small groups of men sat around the bungalows talking it over, without avail, and with somewhat mixed feelings.

Bill said, ‘Funny isn’t it? Now that it’s quiet and that bloody racket has stopped, I feel happy and at the same time sad. Happy that it’s over and we are still alive, but an empty feeling in my stomach about what we are going into’.
John and I agreed that he had ‘hit the nail on the head’ and that these were also our feelings.

The following morning the sun was shining as usual and, apart from snatches of conversation, everything was quiet.
'Too bloody quiet,' said John, echoing our thoughts. We were all waiting for the Japanese to make their next move.

We hadn’t long to wait. At about 10am, two solitary short men appeared over the bank which surrounded the bungalow. They carried rifles and we had, as ordered, stacked our arms ready for take-over. Down the bank they came, dressed in crumpled, thin uniforms. We looked around for more, but none appeared. They sauntered up to us, like schoolboys on an outing, pushing aside those who got in their path. They then proceeded to inspect everything and everybody in the area, with just an occasional grunt of disapproval. The only things they took an interest in were our watches. Grabbing our wrists and looking at the watches with interest, but without taking any. After about ten minutes they departed, sauntering again over the bank and out of sight. John turned to me and said, ‘Crickey, is that what we have capitulated to? Little yellow clowns’. Nevertheless, our fears were, to a large degree, calmed by this episode. No machine guns. No sudden death. We may yet live to see home again, we thought.

That evening we were told that instructions had come from our captors that we were to march to an area on the other side of the island. In fact, all prisoners, including the walking wounded, were to be included. We were not allowed any transport and would leave anything we could not carry. This sounded more like the treatment we had expected from the Japanese and we were relieved to find that they were, at last, showing their true colours. We were not to know that this was their mildest form of treatment.

Early Days of Captivity

The following morning, having loaded ourselves with our personal belongings – our share of the tinned food from the store, the kitchen equipment and items from the medical stores, plus our precious bottle of drinking water – we joined the two mile long column of prisoners, each carrying about 56lbs, on the 18 mile march across the island. The first part

of this march was through the battlefield surrounding Singapore town, where the dead were lying, unburied, on barbed wire and in ditches and hedges. The warm air of this tropical day brought with it the odours of the corpses and the lingering smell of cordite. Bill, John and I were marching together in a rank of three.
Someone said, 'The sooner we are out of this, the better,' and we agreed.

We continued on through the outskirts of the town, with little Japanese soldiers swaggering along in pairs, at intervals along the column. To offset this and show the Chinese population that we were not beaten yet, most of us endeavoured, with our heavy loads, to march upright and in step. This effort did not last long. With the increasing heat of the day and the weight on our

backs, we relaxed when we reached the outskirts of the town. With breaks of five minutes, every hour or so, we continued our march, becoming more and more weary as the day wore on into the heat of the afternoon.
Most of us had saved a little food from our breakfast ration, which was eaten before the end of the morning. Towards the end of the afternoon we were breathing heavily. Our shirts and shorts were heavy with sweat. Our bodies were aching and we walked in a kind of trance, uttering the odd grunt. The water in our bottles, though drunk in mouthfuls only, had expired. Men had discarded equipment along the roadside. We had learned our lesson. To conserve energy by travelling light.
'God! How much further?' we all grunted, from time to time.

Towards evening our spirits rose, as we heard that the head of the column had reached our destination, Changi, a pre-war British Garrison. We passed Changi Jail and some twenty minutes later were led off the road and stumbled across a grassy area to a block of Army married quarters, which were to be our homes for the next few months. We were lucky, being part of a headquarters; we had houses to live in, whilst the majority, including the P.B.I. (Poor Bloody Infantry), were left to construct lean-tos, by cutting down branches from the surrounding vegetation and covering these with leaves. The married quarters were recently constructed houses, with two rooms upstairs and a room and kitchen downstairs. These were allocated at 40 men per house, which, by taking spaces on the floors, gave us adequate room.

John, Bill and myself took up spaces in a downstairs room and lay down in an exhausted state. That evening we ate our last European meal – tinned stew – part of the load we had carried. The rest went into a store, against emergencies. Before we settled down to sleep, we discussed our situation. We all agreed that it wasn't too bad, we had reasonable accommodation, the tropical heat was more than adequate and the Japanese were not worrying us. We did not realise that we had had our last full meal for years, and that from tomorrow we would have to exist on a starvation diet.

The following morning we joined the breakfast queue to be given half a cup of boiled rice. Within an hour our stomachs were empty and we waited, patiently, for another half cup of boiled rice and a ladle of boiled water, with a few vegetable leaves floating on top. The rice was of the poorest quality and the vegetable leaves were stale. The rice passed through our stomachs rapidly, leaving us continually hungry. There were little, or no, vitamins in this food and, as the days wore on, we became more and more hungry. We slept a pitiful sleep,

waking throughout the night, with stomachs aching for food. We became weak and listless, as gradually our bodies became used to this lack of food. Our minds told us we wanted food, but our bodies did not worry us so much. We shed our weight, as we lived off our fat, until we showed all our ribs. Skin dried up and rashes appeared. Cases of beriberi (vitamin deficiency disease) started to creep up. Some died of this and the cemetery, at the side of the road, opposite our area, started to fill up with those who had succumbed to starvation and the wounds inflicted during battle.

The water and sewage services had been damaged during the fighting and we had to rely on latrines (lavatories), constructed by digging slit trenches and covering these with wood. Being in a tropical country, this soon caused dysentery to break out, which, coupled with the starvation caused more deaths.

The sound of the bagpipes was often heard, as the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders buried their dead. John, Bill and myself shared everything we had, which was very little, other than conversation, advice and anything which would or may be of benefit to our general welfare.
Bill would say, 'Tried the leaves on that tree today. Not much good. Bitter and dry'. I heard that someone had contacted a Malay at the edge of our compound and had exchanged his watch for food. It was often a rumour. Just to buck us up, I imparted the news to them.

Gradually our bodies became used to our meagre rations. The Japanese had, very slightly, improved these. Adding about 2oz. of Ghee fat (goat fat) to our 10 day ration. Our cooks had learned to cook rice, without mashing it into a pulp, and we had a few more vegetable leaves.

The Japanese did not come into our area. Staying outside the wire which surrounded it and we were left to do our own thing. We started educational courses, mainly in European languages, to pass some of our days. The main thing which kept us alive was the sun and warmth. We became brown skeleton-like creatures.

In our third month I went down with dysentery and whereas previously, apart from passing water, I didn't go to the toilet for about 10 days, I now got violent stomach pains and was going every half hour, often passing only parts of my stomach lining. I was admitted to a hospital set up by the Medical Officers (M.Os) – 'Changi Hospital', they called it. It was housed in a Barrack Block and here our M.O. carried out marvellous work, with only the medical supplies that

had been carried on the march. The Japanese would not provide any of these desperately needed supplies.

Our M.Os carried out major operations with just local anaesthetics and smaller operations with a reduced amount of anaesthetic. Conserving their meagre supplies as much as possible. Lotions and potions, pills etc. were almost non-existent. I was examined and told that I could have nothing but fluid, water or tea (we hadn't any milk or sugar) until further notice. The only method they had was to starve out the disease. Fortunately for me, mine was only a minor infection of bacillary dysentery and it cleared up within two days of my admission, leaving me in a very weakened state. Upon examining me before discharge, the M.O. found that I had no reflexes in my leg muscles and pronounced that I had dry beriberi. I had noticed stabbing pains in my leg joints before coming into hospital and this starvation upon starvation, had put the cap on it.

I was transferred to another block, which dealt with deficiency diseases, the next day. Here I was examined by another M.O. who again had little, or no, medicines to aid our recovery. I also met the serious cases of beriberi. Those whose bodies were bloated with water. Stomachs in particular. I soon realised the serious nature of this disease, when a man was carried out dead, from the room I was in, on the first night, and others followed. Luck again followed me. The Red Cross had delivered a shipload of food to the island and though the Japanese had taken a good share, about half had been distributed to the prisoners. This being issued as one tin of various food between three men. Amongst this was a quantity of jars of Marmite, which contained the essential, life-giving, Vitamin B. The hospital got the majority of this and I was there whilst it was available. So I had a spoonful with my rice morning and evening for the three weeks I was there and made a good recovery. Though it did leave me with painful limbs for about two months.

Here I met a group of Malayan volunteers, rubber planters mostly. Very nice, well spoken, educated British, who had trained as Territorials in the Military forces of Malaya. Training in their spare time and assisting in the fighting, when the Japs overran Malaya. They taught me the game of Bridge. How to make a bid and Culbertson system. Never to bid without 3 pictures in one suit and to follow my partner’s bid. Not that it was much good to me. I have rarely played since. It was good at the time as it kept my mind off my ailing health and it was good for my education.

It was not all gloom and doom. The conditions of living were, if anything, comfortable, especially in comparison to those on active service in other lands. As I have already mentioned, we had the heat of the sun and were surrounded by lovely tropical scenery. Grassy hills and slopes, with shrubs and trees, covered the area. The barrack block, built of concrete, had open verandas and from these we could see the palm trees waiving in the breeze. The monsoons had started and as I stood on the veranda, I could see quite a distance. A monsoon storm could be seen for a mile or so away. Though quite still, where I stood, the palms and bushes in the distance would bend towards me, with dark clouds chasing them along a wide path. This line of bowing greenery would quickly creep up until when about ¼ mile away, the sound of the accompanying wind would be heard getting louder and louder until, within a few minutes, the downpour would descend on the building in which I stood, driving me off the balcony to seek shelter indoors. Yes, even in conditions of starvation, nature can be a real comfort.

I returned to the married quarters where I was met by Bill, who disclosed the news that our friend, John, had been sent to Singapore Town to work in the docks. This was both good and bad for John. Good because the rations were better than ours and it was possible, at risk of severe punishment, to steal food from the ships. Bad because the prisoners were constantly under the eye of the Japanese. A number of whom were sadistic little creatures, who would beat them up for the slightest misdemeanour.

Bill had kept a space for me. In fact there was more space in the married quarters, now that about a quarter of the occupants had been sent to work in the docks. The food had also slightly increased.
Bill said, 'Perhaps it's because the little yellow buggers can't add up and are giving us rations for more men than we now have'.
'Could well be,' I answered, '…they certainly wouldn't give us more if they were aware of it.'

So, as I said before, our bodies had become used to this inadequate diet and seemed to get every bit of nourishment possible out of it. Now that our food supply had improved and our cooks had learned of ways to cook it, we were able to maintain our very much reduced weight and had a bit more energy. We continued our idle lives, without being disturbed by the Japanese, until July, when news came through that the Japs were demanding work parties to build a railway. A little later we heard that these parties were being shipped off by train from Singapore Railway Station to Thailand. This was generally discussed. Some

thought that only a few hundred may be needed and that this would leave the majority of us in Changi.
George, a cockney, in the corner of our room, said, 'Alright for them that stays. Maybe the rations will increase again'.

During August we heard, from our officer, that all available men were to go and that we would go in three parties during September. The names of those on each party would be read out to us soon. Our names were on different lists, except that Bill was on mine. 'H Force' was the name given to those in my party. This, I found out later, was composed of a mixture of various units, Northumberland Fusiliers, Royal Army Service Corps, Royal Artillery and ourselves, Royal Signals. On the appointed day in September 1942, those Royal Signals on our list, gathered together to await our fate. The optimists amongst us spread rumours that we would be better fed in Thailand. After all, it was said, Thailand is rich in agricultural products. Like babes in arms we believed these rumours, because we wanted food and thought nothing could be worse than the starvation diet we had, so far, existed on. We did not know, or understand, the Japanese and their absolutely uncaring attitude to our welfare.

Journey to Thailand

Three British Army lorries driven by prisoners of war (P.O.W.s), with Japanese guards in the front, came up to us and we were, unceremoniously, loaded into these, with no space to sit down. Our journey had begun; standing and holding on to each other, as the lorries sped into Singapore. At Singapore Station, with a lot of gesticulation from our captors and threatening with the butts of rifles, we were driven, like cattle, into waiting goods trucks. 30 to 40 men per truck, with only just room to sit down, with our knees in our chins. Thus, started a two and a half day journey to our destination in Thailand.

One half of a sliding door was left open, otherwise some of us could well have died from asphyxiation in the tropical heat. In this manner we travelled up Malaya, mostly through Jungle, with the occasional more open aspect of rubber plantations. Our sleep was taken in pitiful half hours, leaning against our neighbours. The train stopped for about an hour, at stations, in the mornings and afternoons, when we were fed and watered, with tea (no sugar or milk) and rice with vegetable stew. Just sufficient to keep us alive until the next stop. We were pleased, therefore, when during the morning of the second day someone

said that we were in Thailand, as we thought we were near to the end of our journey. During the afternoon of this day the train stopped at signals and a few Siamese men came along the train, bartering food. I got a bunch of small green bananas, for a pair of old socks, and shared these with Bill. They were hard and bitter, but anything to assuage our hunger was welcome. We couldn't wait the one day needed to ripen them.

We travelled on during that night and until about midday on the third day, when we arrived at a large village known as Ban-Pong. Our twenty, or so guards ran up and down the trucks yelling in Japanese and hitting one or two of us with their rifles, until we were all out of the wagons. We were then marched off to a camp, made up of a number of long huts made from bamboo and leaves (known as Attap). These materials were readily available from surrounding vegetation and we were to know these type of huts well, as they were to be our living quarters for the next three years. The structure was made of thick bamboo poles, tied together by 'tyes' – the stripped bark of a certain bush. The roof was of 'attap' – long leaves, laced onto sticks. The walls were also covered, to half their height, in 'attap'. The top half being left open for air and light. Inside were two ledges, one on the left and one on the right, which ran the full length of the hut, about 30–35 yards. These ledges, made of split bamboo poles, laid on a structure of thick bamboo poles, were to be our homes. We slept and ate on them and were allowed a space of about 2ft wide, by 6ft long, leaving us just enough space to lie flat. We were allocated huts and settled on the ledges to rest off our uncomfortable journey. The camp was not fenced off and we had access to the village where we were able to barter some of our few possessions for food. Bill found an old shirt for which he got two eggs and some bananas, some of which he kept back for the following day. It was fortunate that he did, as we were told that evening that we were to start a march into the Jungle the following day.

The Three Day March

The following morning we were given our rice and an extra half cup, to keep in our mess tins, for the march. Within an hour of dawn, we were packed into lorries and conveyed some five miles, along a bumpy dirt road, to the edge of the jungle. Here we unloaded and started our march, in single file, along a jungle track. In a very short time we were sweating profusely from the damp atmosphere. It was the beginning of the monsoon period and we had occasional heavy showers. The track was slippy with mud

and uneven, with ground level roots making walking difficult. Carrying about 40lbs. each, marching, or rather stumbling, in this sauna like atmosphere, in a weak condition, caused by starvation, soon sapped our energy. The track became littered with the possessions, which we threw away to lighten our loads. Keeping only the essentials we carried on.

By the end of the morning, the weaker ones amongst us started to totter and fall. Their friends tried to keep them upright by supporting them on both sides. The Japanese had no mercy on those who fell. We heard rifle shots at the rear of the column and guessed the fate of those who were unable to keep up. Fortunately, we were allowed a ten minute break in every hour. As we kept plodding on these breaks seemed further and further apart. By the afternoon, we walked automatically and in a sort of semiconscious state. Not noticing anything around us and uttering only the occasional word. With the constant sweating, we had been forced to empty our bottles, to replace the sweat from our bodies. More and more men were fading out and being helped by the stronger ones amongst us, taking turns in assisting and encouraging them to keep moving.

At about 6pm, as the sun was starting to set, we arrived at a large clearing in the jungle, where we all flopped down. A number of us dropped immediately

into unconsciousness. About an hour later we were shaken awake by our comrades, telling us that food was available over there, in a corner of the clearing. After a stiff and painful walk to the food corner we had tea and rice and vegetable leaves. Every man drank his tea immediately, and before the rice, and we were allowed an extra half mug, at the end of our meal. This drinking brought us all back to wakefulness and conversation, about this dreadful march, which, we were told, we were to repeat for the next two days, before we would arrive at our destination. We had no cover and slept on the open ground that night. I am sure that we all wondered if we would make it, during the next two days. Our aching bodies were, eventually, overcome by utter exhaustion, as we fell asleep.

Day two arrived and we had our rice and tea in the early dawn. We were also able to fill our water bottles, and were given cooked rice to carry in our mess tins. We were all aching from the exhausting march on our first day and had not slept well, on account of our exhaustion. By 8am, after being counted, we were led off into the jungle. The track was a little better than the previous day and a little wider, giving more light, in which to pick our way. As on the previous day, before our fourth rest at about 1pm, some of us began to fail, becoming semi-conscious and falling about like drunken men. Knowing the consequences of this the stronger ones again started to support them.

Again we were running with sweat and in a filthy condition. We had, however, learned from our experiences of the first day and had taken only long sips from our water bottles at each hourly break. The rice which we ate at this fourth break also helped, as it contained water. Nevertheless, as the afternoon wore on, the heat of the day caused quite a number to stumble and fall. Bill and I, though in bad shape, helped one, who had been a school teacher in civilian life, to carry on, by supporting him until the next break, when he was taken over by a friend. I do not remember the last hour, or so, of this day. Both Bill and I were just keeping going in a semi-dazed state. I do remember, however, arriving in a clearing, with a Pagoda at its centre and a number of ornate buildings surrounding it. We were ushered into two of these large buildings, where we all flopped onto the floor and went, immediately, into an exhausted sleep. We were woken from this a short while later to get our rice and tea. After which we again dropped onto the floor and slept until dawn. I remember the beating of drums and tingling of bells, bringing me back to partial consciousness, at intervals during the night.

In the half light of dawn we were issued with rice and tea and water for our bottles and had just enough time to look and wonder at this Buddhist Monastery, set up in the middle of the jungle. The Pagoda was a beautiful work of art. It was built entirely of wood, with a small dome and many carvings, mostly painted in yellow and gold. A large balcony was built on to one of the walls and it was on this that the drums and bells, which had disturbed our sleep, were kept. The only monks we saw were three, who seemed to come out to beat the drums and jingle the bells at hourly intervals. Bill and I talked of this at the beginning of our third and last day of this march and concluded that these drum beats were to enable the monks to know the hour of the day and, perhaps, prayer time. The long huts which, as I have said, were beautifully carved and stood on stilts, over the ground, were built around the Pagoda, forming a square. These were no doubt, the living quarters for the monks, who had been forced to give up two, or three, for the accommodation of prisoners of war, moving through the jungle in parties of about 100, every few days.

These monks must have worked very hard. They kept this clearing in the jungle in perfect order, with vegetable plots and fruit trees throughout the six or seven cleared acres. The marvel was that they kept the jungle from encroaching on their land. Where their land finished there was a clearly defined line of green, bordered by straight walls of jungle. As real a shrine to the Almighty that I have ever seen and we were oblivious to most things on this march.

By 8am we were again back to the dark jungle track, with roots tearing at our boots and branches and thorns tearing at our dripping wet shirts and bodies. We waited anxiously for every break, so that we could use the precious minutes in an endeavour to recover. We lay anywhere. In mud, against ant ridden trees, even against thorn bushes. Anything to get enough energy to survive. During the afternoon Bill and I, like many amongst us, started to falter; we bumped into each other, and those around us, in a drunken fashion. My heart thumped in my chest and I said, 'Don't think I can make it'.
Bill could not support me and said, 'Keep at it. Next break soon'.

Fortunately, a heavy storm occurred at this time and the rain, dropping through the trees, washed down our bodies and helped us a little, though it also caused the track to become more slippery with mud and even more difficult to walk on. As this storm subsided we came to a halt, for an hourly break, at the side of a swift running stream, which would, no doubt, have been dry but for the storm. Though completely exhausted, we all walked into this stream and sat down, allowing the water to ripple around us and completely cover our bodies. We

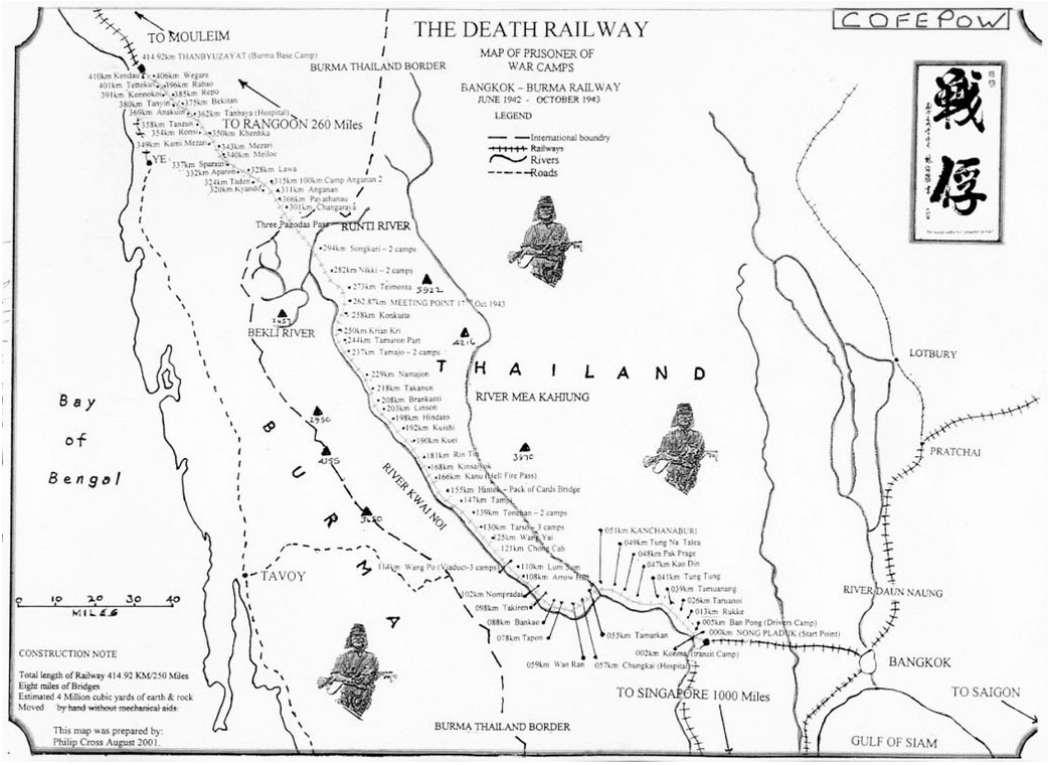
rested for our few remaining minutes, on the bank. This had a marvellous effect and we were ready and capable to carry on, when we were called to our feet for our last hour.

Our last hour proved to be a long one, lasting for about one and three-quarter hours. The benefit of our bathing soon wore off and most of us had great difficulty carrying on, after the first half an hour. We waited and waited to reach our destination, where we hoped to get a real rest. Eventually at about 5pm we came out of the jungle on to a wide path, which led us into Tar-Sao camp, which was to be our main camp whilst we worked on the railway. We had walked 124 Kilometres, on uneven jungle tracks, during the three-day march and we felt and looked like it. Unkempt, unshaven, sweat grimed and absolutely exhausted, leaning on each other, we walked, stumbled, or were carried into the camp where we were directed to two long huts, out of the thirty or so in the camp.

The Railway of Death

As we settled in the huts other P.O.W.s came from their huts to see if their friends, or comrades, had arrived with us. They brought with them their water bottles and handed us drinks. They had also done this march and knew how we felt. After about an hour's rest we were called to collect our rice, vegetable water and tea. After which, having rested a little, we were able to rouse a little interest in our surroundings. We spoke to some of the earlier arrivals who told us that we were the third group to arrive. The first group had been there about two months and had made the clearing and built the huts. The second group had started to clear a track for the railway and went out just after dawn, each day, to return just before dusk.

The following morning, we were told, was a rest day, but we were soon sent out to work in the camp. Bill and I were part of a small party sent down to the river, known as the 'Kwai-Noi', which bordered one side of the camp, the other three sides of the three acre clearing, were boarded by jungle, through which there was little chance of escape. Our job at the river, we soon found, was to unload supplies from the river boats, owned by Siamese. Amongst these supplies were a number of two hundred weight sacks of rice. The Japs expected us to carry one each, but in our thin, undernourished state we were unable to do so. After some bellowing and a bit of slapping from them, we dragged them off the boats, two men to each sack. Having landed them, about 100 sacks, we dragged them up the slippery river bank and carried them to the store huts. A distance of



This map has been hand drawn for COFEPOW by member Philip Cross.

around 500 yards. This was in addition to many other weighty items, and again we were exhausted. Fortunately they did allow us to rest that afternoon. Not so with other members of our group who were on parties constructing new huts. They worked on until dusk.

The hut we lived in, although only a few months old, was in a dilapidated condition. The leaved roof was sagging in places, allowing rain through. This caused the dirt floor of the hut to become muddy in places. What did worry us was the split bamboo ledges on which we ate and slept. Thousands, perhaps millions, of large bugs, which smelt of almond kernels when crushed, clung to the underneath of these ledges and in every concealed crack in the hut. These fed off our bodies, which were already anaemic through lack of food. We tried to reduce, or kill them off, but without insecticides we had neither the energy nor the way in which to accomplish this. On the second day we were called out onto working parties. Shortly after a dawn breakfast of rice and tea, we were marched off to our main task, the building of the railway.

Each day, from thereon, from early morning until late afternoon, we laboured with cross cut saws, axes and chunkles (large hoes), cutting down the trees, some with bases of three to six feet in diameter. Burning down bamboo clumps, which were too difficult to saw. In their green state they sprang back from the axes. These clumps were covered in thorns which cut into the flesh and caused, what we termed ‘jungle ulcers’. Jungle ulcers were difficult to cure, especially in the case of half starved, overworked men, who had no medication and could only cover them with torn up clothing. Those affected tried to cure them, but were often so shattered from work that they hadn't the energy to boil the rags with which they covered the ulcers. The ulcers became larger and larger and in a number of cases turned gangrenous. When gangrene set in it was a case of amputation, or death. The M.O.s carried out many amputations, using only small amounts of local anaesthetics, in the unsanitary confines of leaved huts and saved a number of lives.

We cleared the undergrowth, vines, bushes and small trees. We trimmed the large trees and manhandled all this vegetation, including two tonne trees, to the edge of the cutting, to make a wide track. Conveying of the heavy trees was carried out by pushing a number of stout poles underneath the trunks, at intervals of about three feet. Up to 60 men, four to a pole, two on each side, lifted together and staggered, with all this weight, some forty yards to the edge of the clearing. Once the tree was off the ground we had to hold on. To drop an end, as some did on occasions, caused others on that side, who could not take the extra weight, to drop their end and the tree would roll, injuring anyone who was not fast enough to jump clear.

The shirts and shorts, which we wore, were ripped to threads by thorns and barks and within a couple of weeks we changed our clothing, coolie fashion, to just a piece of cloth round our loins, a pair of worn out boots to protect our feet and our tattered bush hats, to protect our heads from the fierce heat of the sun on the clearing. This work was carried out under the watchful eyes of Korean and Japanese guards, who kept a close eye on us. If we stopped for a minute we were punished by a severe beating and, if we fell to the ground, the guard would kick us. Another punishment was to be made to hold something weighing 30lbs or more, above our heads, in the sun. To drop it meant a severe beating. Most of those getting this treatment held on until they dropped, when the guard would try to kick them into standing. When the guard was satisfied that the man was unconscious he allowed us to carry him into the shade to recover.

Within a few weeks we started to go down with tropical diseases. Malaria and dysentery were the main ones. Our captors would not provide any medical supplies and it was left to fate as to whether, or not, we survived. Our Medical Officers tried to get the Japanese to supply medicines. The Japs had barrels full of Quinine, the antidote for Malaria, in their stores, but refused to issue this. Instead, the M.O.s were beaten up for asking. The spread of dysentery was caused by unsanitary latrines. Trenches, dug out near the huts in which millions of maggots climbed the sides and poured over the edges to become flies, carrying dysentery. Again the M.O.s tried to get the Japanese to allow these trenches to be covered, allowing only holes and to provide lime, with which to kill off the maggots, only to receive another beating. The area, allotted for the dead, on the edge of the jungle, started to fill with the bodies of those who succumbed to gangrenous ulcers, malaria, dysentery and overworked starvation.

Regardless of the terrible conditions in which we lived, there were some creative activities amongst our officers, who at that time did not work, and a few men who were allowed to stay in the camp and did not work on the railway. Certain activities which were useful to the Japs, such as watch repairers, cobblers, hair-cutters and, of course, the cooks. There was also a very good artist, who carried out his work on bits of canvas, paper, wood or anything on which to paint. He was told to do a portrait of the Japanese ‘Camp Commandant’ and though he did not want to carry this out, it was either that or a slow, painful death if he refused. So he did this, showing this Jap Officer in all his glory, standing outside his leaved hut, which had the distinction of having a balcony. He couldn't make a mess of it, so he exaggerated the length of the sword, to make the Officer look even shorter than he was. The Jap Officer was, however, pleased with the painting.
His main aim was to portray pictures of life around the camp, which he did secretly. One painting stands out clearly in my mind. Ronald Searle, the artist, called it 'Le Mort Salute Le Mort', which translated from the French is 'The Dead salute the Dead.' This painting was truly authentic, in showing the terrible conditions under which we lived in Tar-Sao, and portrayed the callous nature of our captors in allowing such conditions to prevail. It showed the emaciated body of a man, lying on a stretcher, made of two bamboo poles, threaded through a rice sack, carried by two equally emaciated prisoners of war, on its way to the burying ground, from the dilapidated leaf hut, known as the 'Jungle Ulcer Death Hut'. Overlooking this were two lines of emaciated P.O.W.s, wearing only the bush hat, loin cloth and boots, into which we had been reduced. The P.O.W.s were standing to attention and saluting as the stretcher passed them. I

knew this hut well, it was four huts down the line from mine, and the stench from rotting flesh could be smelled all round it. I tried to visit a comrade in this hut once, but could only get as far as the open doorway.

These few men and the Officers were the only ones allowed to stay in the camp, other than the seriously ill. The rest of us, some three to four hundred men, worked on the building of the railway. We had neither the ability nor the energy to do anything but rest after our day's work. It was a case of, 'I have got through this one. God help me to get through tomorrow'. Our attention was focused on getting enough rest to cope with the following day. Weeks and months did not exist.

Christmas, 1942, arrived and as usual we worked. Our Officers had, however, got together with the few able bodied men in the camp and prepared a Christmas show. After our rice and leaf stew evening meal we wearily made our way to some ground at the edge of the jungle and sat round to watch. It was good medicine. Pseudo-pantomime, with comedy pointed at the Japanese, and singing. There was a composition of a song, thought up by an Officer, which said it all. Our yearning to be out of this and back with our loved ones. We went back to our huts thinking, 'We can stick it out. It won't be long now.'

January 1943

Just as I was thinking that I had got accustomed to our toil and was becoming optimistic about my survival prospects, I went down with Malaria of the benign tertian type. Lying on the bamboo ledge, with just one worn out blanket for cover, and a haversack for my head, I tried, like some wounded animal, to raise myself for work, which in my demented mind I thought I should do. Only to fall flat again. I must keep going to survive, I thought. My neighbouring comrades told me to stay put and brought their blankets to put over my trembling body.
'Rest, rest' they said. 'You've got Malaria'.
They then left me as they trooped out to their daily work. A man, from further down the hut, came up to me. He was suffering from beriberi and could only walk with the aid of a stick. He brought me water and encouraged me to drink.

Benign tertian malaria was, I found, a type of malaria which attacks every other day, leaving a day in which to recover from the last attack. The attacks were severe, starting with intense cold and shivering over the whole body. Ague is, I

think, the medical term. After about 20 minutes of this, my body rapidly heated to an unbearable degree, and sweat poured out. At this stage I became delirious. The delirium slowly subsided and I dozed off into a sleep, disturbed by dream after dream. Within a short time, about one hour after gaining consciousness, the whole thing would start again. The M.O. saw me in one of my periods of consciousness and told me that he hadn't any quinine and could only advise me to drink as often as I could. In my periods of consciousness I realised that I was getting weaker and weaker. A number of men had already died from this complaint. I made up my mind to fight it.

My recovery was brought about by two things. Firstly, my friends, who collected my ration of rice and cajoled me into eating some of this. They also made sure my water bottle was full before leaving for work. The second was some unknown hero who, at the risk of his life, stole a quantity of quinine from one of the barrels in the Japanese store hut and gave this to the M.O. The M.O. gave me enough of this to dose me, twice a day for six days. It was in powder form and horrible to take, so I wrapped it in thin paper from a small Bible I had and took it that way. The M.O. did not disclose the man's name, but he should have been commended for a medal of distinction. He risked his life to save a number of men.

Throughout the week the Malaria subsided and I started to recover my strength. By the following week I had regained my appetite. My mouth and tongue, which had been dry, became moist, although I felt weak and had shed another few pounds in weight. Had there have been scales to use, I think I would then have been less than seven stone. Nevertheless, I had recovered from this dangerous disease and was soon back on the working parties, where my comrades and friends took turns to cover me from the guards, for a couple of weeks, to allow me to occasionally take a break. Someone once said that man only shows his true spirit of compassion when he is in dire straits. This is certainly true.

February 1943

We did not know one day from another and went and came back from work like automatons, recovering each evening, just sufficiently to manage the next day. We received only enough food and water to keep us alive and capable of working on that terrible railway.

We were told that our group of about 200 men, 150 capable of work, were to be moved to another camp. A day or so later we packed our few possessions and walked, or hobbled, about six miles to a tented camp, on the side of the river, downstream, where a natural clearing had been formed, by the river overflowing during monsoons. Fortunately, the dry season had arrived and we avoided the flooding. We were soon back at work cutting down and clearing the track to meet up with those clearing from Tar-Sao. We often heard, but never saw, the many wild animals who inhabited this jungle. These were tigers, wild elephants, jackals, who barked at night around our camp, and others. We did get glimpses of gibbons, who swung through trees at the edge of the jungle, whooping calls to one another. We occasionally came across dangerous snakes in the undergrowth, when to the call of 'snake' we gathered in a circle round the sighting and killed it, or them, with our long handled hoes. By this method very few of us were bitten.

There was a particularly nasty guard in this camp who we called 'Caesar – Master of all I survey', because of his habit of picking one of the ant hills to stand on top of, as a vantage point on which to survey us. His pet punishment for those he found slacking in their work, usually the sick, was to stand the culprit, or culprits, in the centre of a number of bamboo clumps, which were to be burned down and have these clumps set on fire simultaneously. The heat within this circle became unbearable and when the prisoner, or prisoners escaped, he, or they, were beaten up, to add to their misery.

Apart from this sadist, the Japs and Koreans in this camp were quite tame. They occasionally exploded a couple of sticks of dynamite in the river, which would stun, or kill, a number of fish. We waded out, in the way of the current and collected these fish. The Japs took the best and left us with the rest, which were a very valuable boost to our vitamin free diet.

We stayed three months in this unnamed camp and I only worked on the railway for about one month of this time. A friend of mine arranged for me to cook and look after three Koreans, who were the only ones in the camp. The others being Japanese. Korea was run by the Japanese, before the war and to the Japs, they, the Koreans, were second class and inferior. Although they were part of their forces, the Koreans had to bow to even the lowest rank of the Japanese and were not allowed to camp in their area. Thus, our three Korean guards had a tent to themselves away from the Japs. Though I didn't like the idea of waiting upon any of my captors, I knew it was a soft job, compared with working on the railway and it had the advantage of more food, of a better variety. Self-

preservation won the day and I went to work for them. Fortunately, the leader of these three was quite amenable. He seemed better educated than the other two, who were coarse and could be compared with middle-aged yokels. The leader did not understand English, but was able to communicate with me. I found that they were not all sadists. There were the odd one, or two, who did not like this war and were intelligent enough to understand our feelings.

My taking this job was unfortunate for me and was my undoing, as within a few weeks I went down with amoebic dysentery. No doubt caught whilst cooking, by picking at rice or something. My stomach was soon emptied by continuous bouts of diarrhoea. I was affected by sweating and stomach pains and was sent to an isolated tent on the outskirts of the camp, in a live, or die, situation. I concentrated on the first of these alternatives and without medicines slowly improved to the point where I could walk down to the river, where I found a Thai Boatman. I took off my last negotiable asset. A gold ring which I had been given as a wedding present by my wife. After some bargaining and looking over my shoulder, to see if I was being seen by a Jap, I eventually traded it for six eggs, a bunch of bananas and two Tickles in Thai money, worth about two pence. The Thai, I think, did not know that he had such a good bargain. I consoled myself with the thought that, if this helped me to survive, it was also a bargain for me. Without this nourishment I could have quite easily succumbed to my illness and my ring would then have been of no use to me, or us.

Very carefully, I mixed these eggs and bananas with my rice, over the next week, making sure the bananas were ripe and the eggs boiled over a wood fire, were soft. I had learned, from my previous dose of dysentery, to be wary of my stomach and had to from thereon. This food helped me to recover sufficiently for the M.O. to allow me back amongst the living and I joined my friends in the camp, to be sent out to work the following day, an even thinner and weaker man. Again, my friends covered me from the searching eyes of the guards and ensured that I got the lightest jobs.

About a week later, we met up with the working parties from Tar-Bae and the track was cleared to our camp. We were on the move again. With our few items of clothing in a haversack, over our shoulders and our working clothes (a hat, a piece of cloth and worn out boots) on our brown ribbed bodies, we wended our way to a camp, known as "Warn-Po' – a walk of about six miles downriver. This camp was situated in a small clearing, at the side of the river Kwai-Nai, in which a Thai farmer was trying to make a living. He had built a house of bamboo and attap leaves, on stilts near the river. But, I think, no sooner had he cleared land,

than the jungle crept back over it. He and his family, a wife and three children, lived on a small amount of rice, produced in about half an acre of cleared land, near to his house, bananas from a small plantation and fish from the river.

The Japs had taken over some of his cleared land, and the P.O.Ws had extended this, by clearing the Jungle back, to cover an area of about half a square mile. In this area some fifty tents and a few long huts had been erected. We were put into tents, close to the cleared railway track. The next morning we were put to our task of boring holes in rock, into which the Japs placed dynamite, to blast a way through a ledge, to make a quarter mile cutting. Every day we collected 'Hammers and Jumpers'. That is sledge hammers and hand held steel drills, to work on quarrying out the rock. We worked in pairs, one man holding the drill, and the other hitting it into the rock, to bore the hole. We took turns with the sledge hammer, which none of us had the strength to raise much above waist height. The heat on the rock face was intense and we sweated profusely. A number of unwary men were injured by sledge hammers slipping in wet hands, whilst holding the drill. Our progress was slow and the Japs became nasty, beating up a number of men each day. They then introduced 'Peace Work'. At first allowing the pairs who completed a metre of boring to go back to the camp. The result of this was that some of the Northumberland Fusiliers, who had peacetime knowledge of mining and were used to their tools, were able to finish work in the early afternoon, whilst the weakest of us stayed on until dark and were often beaten up for taking so much time.

Seeing the Fusiliers going off early, the Japs increased the quota to one and a half metres. This caused more men to fail in their task and more beatings. We had a meeting, quietly, in the camp and decided that we would all work at the same pace as the slowest. We agreed that the last thing we wanted was to complete this railway, as we knew it would be used to carry weapons and ammunition to Burma, to the detriment of our troops, fighting there. This infuriated the Japs and more beatings were carried out, without results. The cutting took about a month to complete, against the Japs estimate of two weeks. About twelve men died from injuries and utter exhaustion.

We were allowed a day off after finishing the cutting, and were then put on to building a bridge over a ravine at the side of the river. As usual, this bridge, about fifty feet high, was built by manpower. No machinery. We cut down large trees from the jungle, trimmed them and up to 60 men per tree either dragged or carried the trunks to the river. The tree trunks were then drilled, to make bolt holes and bolted together to make trestles. Trestles, up to five tons in

weight, were hoisted with ropes over trees and dropped into prepared deep holes in the ground. Then they were filled in with river sand and stones, until they were vertical. At the highest points, two trestles were used, one on top of the other, to gain the required height. Before finishing the bridge we planted white ants nests (wood eating ants) at the base of a number of the trestles, in our endeavour to make sure the bridge would not last too long.

Our final job was to level the ground, from the rock cutting, for about half a mile, to level ground. This was to dig out earth, about a hundred yards wide and starting at one metre deep, gradually reducing to a few inches deep. Hundreds of tons of earth to be dug and cleared. The Japs wanted this done at the 'Speedo' and put us on round the clock, day and night shifts, with the use of oil torches at nights. We were split into threes. Two digging out and filling stretchers made of two bamboo poles, with a rice sack threaded through them. The third man filled the stretchers with the soil thrown out of the holes, which, when filled, was carried by him and one of the diggers, up the side of the cutting to be dumped. This was very heavy work, especially in our weak condition. After the first hour our legs buckled under the weight of the stretcher and our arms stiffened and ached from digging. Fortunately it only lasted for just over a week, as a number of men became too weak to work. Putting more strain on those who carried on.

During this last job at Wam-Po, the first locomotive arrived at the bridge, which it did not cross. I had been on the night shift and was sleeping it off in the camp. My friend woke me and we saw that it was pushing trucks laden with sleepers and lines. The line laying gangs had arrived. The P.O.Ws of the gangs came down to be fed in the camp and amongst them was John, my friend when we were taken prisoners at Singapore. He seemed in good shape, compared with us. Stronger with a little more weight. He told me that the line layers were a favoured few, who got more food and rest than ourselves. This was the last time that I saw him. He died from a severe bout of Malaria, at a camp on the Siam/ Burma border. No doubt, without the aid of quinine, which the Japs would not provide. A sick man was of no use to them. They had no further use for him, unless he recovered. John died at about 24 years of age. I remember him as a fit, broad young man, serious in nature, but always ready with dry witty remarks. Something like a Norseman, with pale complexion, blonde hair and blue eyes. He was the essence of loyalty, to those with whom he made friends.

As we finished the cutting, the line laying gangs moved through and up the line to Tar-Sao. We had one day's rest and were again on the move, back to our base

camp at Tar-Sao. A walk of about nine miles. The Japs could have put us on a train for, at least, part of the way. But, apparently did not consider it, although they and we knew that we were in no condition to do this march. So we hobbled and slouched along the track. As we came off the track, onto the wide path leading into Tar-Sao, a wit in the column shouted out, 'Are we downhearted?' to which we shouted, 'Yes'. As if by magic, we all started to straighten ourselves. Someone began to sing 'Roll out the barrel', and we fell into step, as we joined in the song. We formed up into threes and as we came level with the Jap huts, we broke into 'British Grenadiers'. Every man that was capable marched upright and in step. Our way of telling the Japs that we were not beaten yet, and were part of a British Army, which could take it. The Japs came out of their huts and watched us, as did those P.O.Ws who were around the camp. Personally, I was both proud .of this effort to 'cock a snook' at the Japs and at the same time, afraid that they might take drastic reprisals. However, they just looked at us and did nothing. As for ourselves we just slumped down on the ledges, in the huts we were directed to, and with a little laughter, sank into an exhausted sleep.

We spent about a week in Tar-Sao. Tidying up the railway track, beyond the camp, northward towards Burma. We also did a few jobs around the camp. All of which was much lighter work than we had been accustomed to.

July 1943

We were in a little better shape when we moved off again. This time up the track to a camp known as Tonchin. This was a camp of dilapidated huts, holding about 300 men. We were now 120 in number. Sickness and death had reduced us to our present number. At first we were put to work on tidying and ballasting the railway line, which had been completed to a point about a mile past this camp. There was a hold up in the clearing of the jungle, about two miles from the camp, caused by a deep ravine, on the sides of which were a number of large teak trees and heavy undergrowth. We were soon transferred to assist in clearing and levelling this obstruction. Each day, for about a week, we were subjected to a two mile walk, over rough ground, in each direction. Our work was to help cut a way through; again we were not in a fit state to undertake this work. Cutting down trees with 3 to 6 ft. diameter bowls, using by then, rather blunt cross cut saws and standing on slippery slopes, is no job for sick men and we still had the thick undergrowth to deal with. Fortunately, for the first time, we had elephants to

help us to lug them away. However, Elephants are not the ideal animals to use in a small area, crowded with about 300 men, as we soon found out.

The mahouts, sitting on the elephants' heads, were rather unmerciful to these large beasts, hitting them on the forehead with small spiked hammers to get them to pull at the trees we had felled. They occasionally fetched blood, and the elephants reacted dangerously, lashing about in all directions and sometimes breaking their chains. We had to watch them carefully and keep away as much as possible. A number of our comrades had been injured in the elephants' endeavours to get away.

Whilst working at this camp we came home one night to hear that cholera had broken out at the Spring camp, three kilometres down the river from us, and that three men had already gone down with it. We all realised how serious this was. A great danger to our survival. In our pitiful condition there was little, or no, chance of overcoming this disease. This was confirmed the following morning, when the camp came to within shouting distance, and a man from the Spring called out that Cholera had struck in his camp and a number of men had contracted the disease, and were not expected to live. Our one, and only Medical Officer called a meeting after work that evening, which everyone was to attend. He informed us of the gravity of this disease and issued instructions to all of us. All water, including that collected from the roofs of our huts during the recently started heavy monsoon storms, was to be boiled. He had obtained a large oil drum, which was to contain water, to be kept at boiling point with a permanent fire underneath it. We were all to dip our mess tins and spoons in this boiling water before we ate. We were not to drink water from holes in the ground, which we had done when our bottles ran out at work. In fact, no water, including and particularly from the river which was the carrier of the disease, was to be used for any purpose, including washing, unless it was first boiled. We could wash ourselves in the tropical downpours, if the water fell directly on to us, and had not first fallen on anything else, for instance the trees. He stressed that this was vital and that unless we obeyed his instructions to a man, half of us could be dead within a few weeks. He finalised by saying that, although he was British, he would ensure that anyone found disobeying his instructions would not live to see the deaths they caused.

This was a shock. Another obstacle to our survival. We relied on water to get us through the day and now we could only take one bottle of boiled water to our work. The monsoon helped, as the hourly downpours kept our bodies cool and needing less moisture.

About three weeks later the Cholera went, almost as fast as it came, although we continued to drink only boiled water. Our camp was one of a few which had escaped its ravages. This Medical Officer, a former Indian Army Doctor had, I am sure, saved us from this by immediately issuing his instructions, and we had policed each other throughout the epidemic. We heard that, in this short time, almost 300 men from the Spring camp had died, out of about 800 men. They had a neighbouring camp of Malays and Tamils (Indian labourers), who had been enticed by the Japs to work on the railway. Almost half of these died, which was due, we were sure, to the fact that they were independent and had very little knowledge of hygiene. They, no doubt, had some bearing on the outbreak in the Spring camp. The outbreak had affected many camps alongside the river. I did not hear of the total deaths caused by this disease, but it certainly topped the four figure mark, which included native labour.

We finished our work at this camp by constructing two small bridges out of logs, to cross the ravines we had helped to clear.

Late August 1943

We had a two day break after our work and again we were on the move. Now almost to a man, worn out, sick and listless, we walked like automatons to a camp known as Kin-Sao. Starting in the morning, it took us until well into the afternoon to reach a tented camp, a short distance from the main camp, some five or six miles up the line. This was the worst camp we had been in. The tents were erected under trees, in the jungle, where only the undergrowth had been cleared. The ground was unlevel and most of the tents were in dips. The continual tropical storms flooded the tents, as we soon found out. We tried to make a trench round our tent, but without tools it was impossible to dig deep enough. We used our spoon and bits of wood to dig down, without success. The result was that we lay down each night with a sodden blanket and our few remaining possessions were in the same state. These conditions did not improve during the twenty, or so, days which we spent in this camp.

Our job, at this camp, was to clear a half mile track through an area where there was a rocky outcrop. This meant digging round the rocks and boring them ready for blasting. Again we were using stretchers to carry away the earth and rock which had been blasted. We also, of course, had a lot of difficulty digging. We worked from dawn to dusk and, as I remember it, were completely shattered

throughout each afternoon. We walked back to the camp each evening in a dazed state, and dropped onto our wet blanket. I remember one tropical evening when we summoned up energy to collect our rice, going out into the pouring rain and standing in mud in the queue where very few were talking, some wit ahead of us saying in a loud voice, 'Oh, if only mother could see me now'. This summed it all up. How much worse could we get? The Japs had us on peace work again, but it made very little difference. I think they and we knew that we were not capable of any more work.

There was a particularly nasty Korean guard, who was overseeing the Australians. We called him the 'Kin-Sao Gorilla'. I think his name was Yasimoto. He punished on the slightest provocation. He killed a sick Australian by using the butt of his rifle on this man, whose dysentery forced him to leave his job to relieve himself on the side of the track. The Australians vowed, there and then, to get him when they were released. I know that they carried this out.

At last, the cutting was completed. These twenty days had been like an eternity. The following day we were on the move. This time down the line to our last camp at 'Tonchin'. We passed the line layers on our way and I hadn't the strength to look for my friend John. They were on their way past Kin-Sao and on towards the Burma Border. I cannot remember this march back to Tonchin. I was too weak and sick, as were most of our group. We had left some men at Kin-Sao, who were too sick to walk. To be too sick at this stage meant at death's door. I knew this and though I did not feel capable, had joined the march rather than stay and become a write off. I know that we landed back in the dilapidated hut, which we had left over two weeks ago. The leafed roof sagged in places, letting in rivulets of water, as each monsoon storm arrived. The earth floor between the bamboo platforms developed pools of water, causing muddy patches along the length of the huts. Most of the huts in this camp were in the same sorry state.

Our first day back was a rest day, in which we spent most of our time trying to dry out our one blanket, or piece of sacking, which was still soggy from our tents at Kin-Sao. We also dried our few items of clothing; each of which had to be scraped and shaken, in an attempt to remove the clogged mud. The following day we were back on work parades. The work was, however, much lighter and consisted of tidying up the sides of the track, or doing odd jobs around the camp. The hours were less. We worked from 8.30am until 4pm.

'H' group seemed to have completed its task of clearing and levelling about 58 kilometres, through the jungle, from Wam-Po to Kin-Sao. One other group had also been involved in this. Many had died and were buried in camp areas up and down the line. Others were dying daily. Starvation diets, heavy work, tropical diseases and no medical supplies or provisions for the sick were the cause. The Japanese had been, and still were, forcing sick men to work. As more and more men became sick they had imposed a quota of men allowed to be kept off working parties. Our Medical Officers were left with the onerous job of deciding which of the seriously ill men in the camp were to go to work. I heard of camps in which the fitter men had to carry the sick to work on stretchers, to satisfy the Japs, whose one and only thought was to complete the line, for the glory of their Emperor.

About a week after our return to Tonchin, we experienced the unusual event of the Japs paying us for our work. Ten cents a day was the amount paid, on irregular occasions. I think I received about three of these payments. On this occasion it was for 30 days, and I got three Thai Tickles, worth about 30 pence. This was however, a fortune to us, who had no money or means of supplementing our starvation diet. My small fortune was my downfall. I went down to the river and bought a pound, or so, of peanuts from a boatman. I knew that these were rich in vitamin 'B' and thought that they would help me to recover, in my present pitiful condition. I was extremely thin and weak, from diarrhoea, caused by my amoebic dysentery and the heavy work I had been doing on the railway. I did not realise the effect these peanuts would have on my scarred and sore intestines.

After chewing and swallowing about a quarter of them I started to feel sick, soon followed by sickness and violent diarrhoea, as these peanuts reached my stomach. By the evening of that day I was in a much worse state than I was when I first contacted this disease. I could not eat and could only swallow water in small quantities. I lay on my space on the platform and could not move for fear of my stomach upsets, and eventually from utter exhaustion. I was in a live or die situation again. This time, however, I realised that I could well be on the losing side. My friends and comrades did all they could, but I could not eat their offerings. Night and day for three days, or thereabouts, I fought for my life. I was constantly evacuating my bowels. To save my close neighbouring comrades, I crawled to the edge of the bamboo platform and waving about like a drunken man, I negotiated my way to the latrines, which were about 400 yards from my hut, along a slippery mud path. I returned in the same fashion to drop onto my bed space. Within a few minutes of my return my stomach again gave me

warning of my next bout and less than an hour later I had to repeat this exhausting painful journey. The nights were the worst. In a semi-conscious state I had to try to walk the 400 yards, or so. How can I explain it? I was very weak and dressed, as usual, in just a piece of rag round my thighs. I often was forced, by tiredness, or the urgency of my stomach, to leave my boots at the bottom of my bed space, on the dirt floor. Another reason for leaving them was that I could not check them for the odd scorpion who may have crept into them. Often I walked out of the hut into a tropical storm which, at night, could be very chilly, especially so to a man with a temperature above normal. I struggled to get to the maggot infested latrines and must admit that on more than one occasion I had to relieve myself in the mud at the side of the path. Gruesome, isn't it? But as much as seven or eight times per night I had to summon up every ounce of strength my weak body would allow, to accomplish each journey. I certainly did think, at that time, that I would not make it.

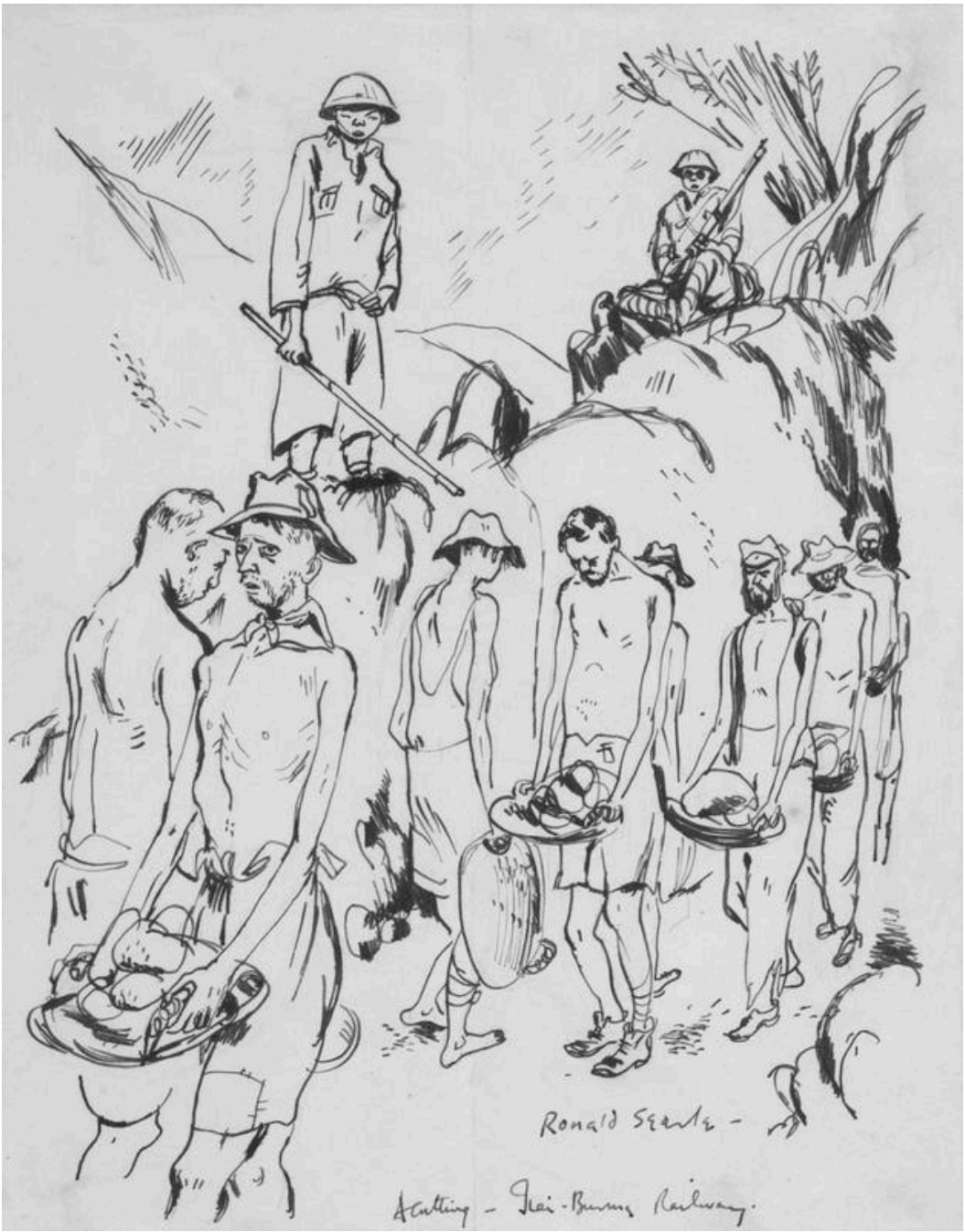
Fortunately, on or around the fourth day, my stomach pains eased a little and my journeys to the latrines became fewer. I started to think that I might yet avoid the rice sack. I realised that I was very weak, having had no food for over three days. Perhaps, I thought, the Medical Officer could help, or advise me on the way to recovery. The following morning, knowing full well that he did not have any medicaments and no means of anything but advice, I struggled over to the M.O.s hut and joined the small queue of sufferers. He looked me over, as I explained my plight and, as usual, told me that he could do nothing, but advised me to start eating, in small quantities, and try to get back to my full ration, as soon as my stomach would stand it. He told me I was in a critical state of starvation, which only food could now cure.
As I turned to leave he tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Give your name and number to the Orderly over there'.
I did as I was told and asked the Orderly what this was for.
The Orderly said, "Well, it is secret, so don't mention this to anyone. Your name is on a list of a few men who are to go down river to a rest camp.'
I returned to my hut, thinking this can't be true. The Japs have never considered the sick and showed utter indifference to the dead and the dying. This could be just a ruse to finish off the weakest of us.I also had developed an ‘Old Bill in a better hole’ mentality. In other words, I felt safer in the hole I was in and uncomfortable at the thought of moving to an unknown one. Reason, however, prevailed. If I was to recover I knew that my chances in this camp were very slight. There were absolutely no facilities for the sick. It was still a working camp and I could be put on a work party the moment I showed any signs of recovering my strength. 'Damn it, I must take the risk'.

A few days later I was called to the M.O's hut where, together, about 30 of us were told to prepare to move the following morning. We were to be taken, by boat, to Tar-Sao. This was unusual, we had always had to walk. Maybe the Japs were showing some compassion. The following morning we thirty fortunates, or unfortunates, we didn't yet know, gathered outside the M.O.s hut. All of us just about able to walk and dressed in our usual bush hat, loin cloth and boots, with our ribs showing clearly through our wrinkled, sun-burned skins. We were led off, down to the river, where we were packed into a small boat for an hour's journey to Tar-Sao. At Tar-Sao we were led off to an area known as the hospital compound. Four or five long huts into which the seriously ill were put. There were also two huts, into which those who were fit enough to travel were being collected. In the afternoon we were examined by a Medical Officer who told me, and one or two others, to go to the seriously sick huts. I was sent to a dysentery hut. On entering this hut I was immediately sickened by the smell which I found emanated from men who were too weak to get off these platforms and were incontinent. There was no-one to help them to reach these boxes with buckets, which acted as commodes for those who had the strength to get to them. These were placed, at intervals, on the central dirt floors, between the platforms.

Some forty to fifty men on the point of death occupied this hut. I realised that this was a death hut and quickly made up my mind to get out, as soon as possible. Otherwise, I would soon be in the same state as the other unfortunates. On my way out, on a stretcher, with a rice sack covering my body. I set about keeping on my feet and walked the hut, up and down, as often as my failing body would allow. I ate my ration of soggy rice, in small quantities, pushing it down my throat to the point of sickness. On the second day, after a pitiful sleep, broken by stomach pains and sweating, I convinced the M.O. in charge, mainly by lying about my condition and showing alertness, that I was capable of looking after myself. He reluctantly allowed me to be moved to one of the huts in which the men to be moved down river were being collected.

This was like being moved to heaven, after a spell in hell. Although all the occupants of this hut were sick and in very bad shape they were able to get about and look after themselves. I looked around for someone I knew and found a man, whose name I have forgotten, who was from my unit, Royal Signals. Although in a bad condition, he helped me by collecting my rice and encouraging me to walk. He cut me a stick from a tree, which helped me to get on my feet. Within two days I was on the road to recovery, from terminally ill, to ill, and able to look after myself. Gradually, during the next few days, I became

stronger and capable of walking without the aid of my stick. This was due to my helpmate and to the fact that I was buoyed up by being a survivor, living with



survivors. This was just in time, for a few days later we heard that we were moving the next morning.

Directly after our meal the following morning, we collected our few belongings, now only a few pounds in weight, and assembled outside the hut. After a quick check of our numbers, the Jap guards led us off, down the track, to the railway. There was about 150 of us in this straggling column of sick skeletons. At the railway track we were, unceremoniously loaded into waiting goods wagons, and although I did not know this at the time, my greatest friend, Tom Goring, who gave me the means and incentive to carry on for the next two years, was pushed into the same wagon as myself. Fate, luck, the will of God, whatever, it was my salvation from early death that he was on that train and in my wagon on that day in September 1943.

Addendum

Many of my friends and comrades, who were with me on the building of this railway said at that time, 'It is no use trying to explain the conditions and starvation we are going through. No one will believe or understand this without having experienced it'.

I have put down only my day-to-day experiences. Some of which I have forgotten, or my mind will not recall. I have said very little of the Japanese attitude towards us, or of their punishments, which led to the death of many prisoners, some of which I saw. Their mentality to punishment for disobedience can only be described as something worse than the feudal lords of the middle ages, when fingers were cut off for thieving and everyday hangings were carried out for more serious crimes. To beat up sick men for not being able to work, when they could only just about stand, is only one example of this cult. Death through torture and sustained punishment was the treatment for disobedience, or arguing with them.

I have tried to say something of my friends and comrades during these hard days. There was very little disagreement amongst us all. We closed ranks against our captors. We were all in it together and ready to give a hand to those whose suffering was worse than our own. Some even risking their own lives to aid others. I have spoken of those who livened us up in the most difficult situations, by coming out with witty remarks, when they themselves were suffering – human nature at its best.

Journey Out of the Jungle

The railway was almost finished, when the Japanese decided to send groups of the more seriously ill, down river, out of the jungle to rest camps. They made sure that they had enough men left to complete the job and then allowed only small groups to go. The decision as to who, amongst the thousands of sick men, should go was left to our Medical Officers. It was easy for the M.O's to decide on the more seriously sick. Their problem was to decide amongst these which were fit enough to travel. They knew full well that those who were not fit to travel would deteriorate, to the point of death, in the terrible conditions which prevailed in the jungle camps. My group was one of the first to go. 'Fit for travel!' We were hardly able to walk the half mile to the railway tracks, where we were crowded into four goods wagons. Skeleton like men, with brown wrinkled skins, clothed in the usual bush hat, piece of cloth and worn out boots. Some, whose boots had completely worn out, walked barefooted.

The tropical sun beat down on the railway track and the sticky heat of the day became almost unbearable in the overheated trucks. Flies, attracted by our sweat, swarmed into and around the trucks, feeding on our sweat and landing on the scars and sores, with which we were all afflicted. We sat with bent heads, fighting off the pains of dysentery. We were used to our discomforts and able to discount them. The fittest chatted, occasionally, to their neighbours, but most, like me, just sat thinking, 'What now? We can't trust the Japs. Perhaps they are sending us to a final job, to finish us off,' or 'Now that the railway is nearly finished, they could have had a change of heart.'

A Geordie from the Northumberland Fusiliers, sitting near to me, groaned and said, 'God man. Me stomach's like a football'.

'Stand up then', said his companion, 'might ease it a bit'.

He got up and immediately made a beeline to the open door of the truck where, with the aid of his friend, he squatted to relieve himself, on to the track.

A while later, a steam locomotive, of the Pacific type, came along the track and, after some manoeuvring, hitched up to the train, which included our trucks. A Scot, from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, said, 'Abute bloody time. Now, maybe, we'll get on the move and get some air in this hell hole'.

The train had just started its journey, when a hand descended onto my shoulder and someone said, 'Break, isn't it?'

This was the name I was known by. I turned and looked up at his stooping figure. 'Thought so,' he said, 'couldn't see you properly from over there – bit dark.'

I searched his face and recognised someone I had known.

Seeing my questioning gaze, he said, 'Tom, Tom Goring.'

'Blimey, you've changed,' I said, looking at his ribbed body and long thin face.

'You haven't done so badly,' he said, 'been dieting, or something?'

Now I recognised his quiet Lancashire humour, and the hint of a smile which followed it. Tom was from my unit, where he had served as a wireless operator. We had met and drunk together in Cheshire, before embarkation and had last seen each other when we were first taken prisoners.

'What brings you on this trip?' he said.

'Malaria, dysentery. The usual,' I said, 'got some peanuts off the boatman. Nearly finished me off. Didn't know my stomach couldn't take them. M.O. at Tonchin put me on the list'.

'Amoebic' he said, referring to the type of dysentery.

I agreed, and he said: 'I've got the same. I was put on the list by an M.O. at Tar-Sao.'

At this point I got a severe attack of stomach pains, caused by the jolting movement of the truck. He saw this and said, 'Come on. I'll help you over to the door.'

We moved and picked our way through the men on the floor and he held me whilst I relieved my stomach over the edge. The men near the door kept an area cleared for this purpose. They all knew the problems of dysentery and this door was in constant use by most of us in the truck.

We moved back to our position on the floor and I soon regained my composure. It was good to have a friend. I had left mine behind in Tonchin camp. A friend was a real necessity, as we had learned. One looked after the other in times of severe illness and the ability to talk out our thoughts and problems to someone, was a relief to the body and mind. Tom had also left his friends in the jungle camps and was, no doubt, looking for someone he knew, when he spotted me. Thus began a friendship which, undoubtedly, saved my life, and which like many, up and down the railway track, was one bonded by the extreme hardship we were enduring. With one common enemy, we strived to encourage each other to stick it out and survive. Tom had the gift of a quick mind, able to sort out problems and take advantage of any situation which could be of use to us. I was able to take his lead to secure these advantages, to better our existence.

The train rumbled on at a slow pace. The driver must have known that the track was insecure. Built in such a short time, with unwilling labour, he could and no doubt had, come across many faults on the line, some of which were, by no means, accidental. We were approaching Wam-Po camp and I told Tom that I had been involved in the building of a large bridge there.

I said, 'God, I hope we get across it. We planted nests of white ants at the base of some of the trestles. Just my luck if the damned thing collapses as we go across'.

As we approached the bridge the train slowed down to walking pace. I became a bit tense, but had trained my mind to think of things as a matter of fate. The train started its perilous journey across the ravine. The engine puffed every few seconds. Just enough to keep us moving. On and on over the 500 yards of groaning and swaying timber until, to our relief, it reached firm land again and increased its speed.

'Whoever he is,' I said, referring to the driver, 'he certainly knows his stuff. If he hadn't crept over that lot, we could have been sprouting wings by now'.

'You're telling me,' said Tom, 'I didn't exactly enjoy that bit.'
The train continued on, in the half light, on the single track, with the jungle a few yards on either side of the tracks, which was cutting out the direct rays of the sun. It seemed to me that nature was taking over again, as the thick mat of trees and undergrowth swept past, within a few yards of the train. It reminded me of the dark cuttings before entering a railway tunnel, on the railways at home. This was a continuous cutting with only the rare shaft of sunlight

creeping through, where the jungle thinned out a little. At about four o'clock in the afternoon, the jungle started to thin out and the train increased its speed on the firmer and more level ground. A short time later we came to the edge of the jungle and could see, through the door, that we were on an open plain with occasional native huts, dotted about the landscape. The train slowed down as it went over the points onto a siding and stopped. We were ushered out of the trucks into brilliant sunshine, which we had not seen since we first entered the half light of the jungle, some thirteen months ago.

The Tailors of Chung-Kai

With hands shading our eyes, from the unaccustomed light, we surveyed our destination and found that we were within a few yards of a camp, surrounded by a high bamboo fence and situated on the open sun scorched plain.
As we stumbled our way across to the gate of the camp, Tom said, 'All this space. It's like being freed – to be out in the open again'.
To which, I agreed. We passed through the gates and past the usual guard hut, with two Japanese guards sitting under the canopy in a relaxed attitude, and were guided to some newly built leaved huts, where we were told to settle in.
'Blimey, this is an improvement,' said a Norfolk man as we entered our hut.
'Yes. The Ritz, after what we've been used to,' said Tom.

Apart from being newly constructed, the hut was larger than those we had occupied in the Jungle camps. The roof, made of bamboo struts, covered palm leaves, was higher, allowing more light through the sides, which were half covered in palm leaves, leaving the upper portion of the sides open to the daylight. It was also wider, leaving a much wider passage in the middle of the hut, between the bamboo platforms on each side – on which we lived and slept. In our former huts we had been used to a space of about 2.5 feet by 6 feet, we now had about 5 foot by 6 foot. Being new it was clean and free from the thousands of bugs which preyed upon us in the jungle camps. We selected our spaces and settled down to rest-off the tiring effects of our journey, until about an hour later, when someone shouted 'Missi' (Japanese for rice). We all stirred, rolled off the platforms and hurried to the end of the hut, with our mess tins clanging by our sides. We were issued with the usual rice and leaf stew. Apart from the rice, which was of a better quality than that we had been used to, it was the same as we had been having, but well appreciated, as we had not eaten since early morning.

The sun was setting, as we settled down to eat and, as is usual in tropical climates, darkness was upon us in a very short time. One or two men had carried their lamps and very small quantities of coconut oil. The lamps had been made of tins, with a strip of cloth held by bits of wire, or metal, with one end dipped in the oil and the other end fixed above the can to provide the light. We did not possess matches, so a light was obtained from the nearest cook house fire and passed lamp to lamp through the huts. The result was a flicker of light, here and there, in each hut.

With darkness came the 'Racketeers'. The few prisoners who had the chance, or ability, to obtain small quantities of food from the natives outside the camp. Mostly this was rice and Malacca sugar, with which to make 'coffee'. They roasted about half a pound of rice until it was almost burned and boiled this in a gallon size petrol can full of water, adding the sugar. The result being a sweet drink, with a slight coffee flavour. This they sold, to those with money, at 10 cents, (less than ¾ pence) per mug. The trouble was that very few of us had money, even to the value of a farthing. Occasionally, we could get sips from friends, or comrades, who were able to pay. There was little, or no, sugar in our normal ration of rice and boiled leaves. This was a real treat because of its sweet and temporary energy giving qualities.

Tom said, 'Got any money?'
I said, 'No.'

'Pity,' said he, 'I could have done with some of that.'

We sat on our part of the ledge chatting about our fortunes and were joined by the man from the Norfolk Regiment, whose space was next to Tom. He told us that his name was George, and was pleased to hear that we were from the Corps of Signals, as he had been a runner (message carrier), attached to Brigade Signals, so we had that in common. Like most Norfolk men, he worked on the land. He was tall and broad, though like ourselves, he was suffering from amoebic dysentery, which in our condition was continuous, and could not be cured. In consequence of this, and our very poor food, his skin hung onto his big frame, covering little more than his ribs.

The next day we were sufficiently recovered from our journey, to survey our new camp, and found that it was about half a mile square. It was bordered, on one side, by the river Kwai-Ya, with which we were familiar. Most of our jungle

camps had been situated on the banks of this river, from which we drew our water. The other three sides were bordered by a high bamboo fence, unlike our former camps, which were bordered by the jungle through which there was little chance of escape. The camp contained about forty long huts, each capable of sleeping 60 to 80 men. More than half of these were unoccupied and many were newly built.

The Japanese guards seemed very mild and disinterested in us, which was unusual and there was an air of freedom about the place, accentuated, no doubt, by the fact that we were in the open, away from the half-light of the jungle. To our amazement we also found that a canteen, in the shape of a small wooden hut, was available to us. This sold bananas, peanuts and other small items of food. It was of no use to us, however, as we did not have money to buy these precious items. The occupied huts were mainly taken up by the men who worked in and around the camp. There were two huts in which our officers were situated and a few huts taken up by other sick prisoners, who had been sent down from the jungle. We returned to our hut, where we sat down on the bamboo ledge and discussed our situation. I said, 'Not bad. Plenty-of space and the guards seem very subdued. What's happening?'

'They haven't yet called us out to work.' Tom said, 'Yes and what about that canteen? Never seen anything like that before. Perhaps the message has begun to sink in. They are not going to win this war. Anyway, the railway's finished. Maybe they are going to go lighter on us for a bit?'

We lay back on our bamboo area and rested, to recover from our exertion of walking the camp. It was almost noon. The sun was high in the sky and the temperature around 95°F, which we were quite used to. We had worked in this and higher temperatures. It felt great to be free from work and not overcrowded in our newly built hut. We both dozed off to sleep, regardless of the chattering of our neighbours on the ledge. When I awoke, about an hour later, Tom was lying on his back, looking up at the leafed roof of the hut, obviously in deep thought. Seeing me awake, he turned towards me lifting himself up on to his elbow, 'I've been thinking,' he said, 'have you got any cotton, or needles in your 'housewife'?'

A 'housewife' was the name given to a small darning and sewing outfit, which was issued to British soldiers. About six by three inches of cloth, with small pockets, containing cotton, a skein of wool, a thimble, scissors and a pad containing three needles of different sizes. In the closed position this was rolled

up and tied with a piece of tape. Being very light in weight, it was one of the very few things I still had. I pushed my hand into my pack, which also served as my pillow, and easily found it, amongst my very few possessions. The only other things I still had were a pair of worn out boots, a pair of clean, but well worn, shorts, kept for the day of our release, a tattered shirt, also kept clean for that important day, a mess tin, a mug and a spoon. Lying by my side was my battered bush hat and under me, my well-worn and ragged blanket. The many other items of equipment I had, when first taken prisoner, had either rotted in the damp of the jungle or been thrown away to lighten my load, when marching from camp to camp.

'Here you are,' I said, 'almost intact. I haven't used much of it'.

'Good,' he said. 'What I have been thinking is that if we are to recover, we need money. We can only just about manage to keep alive on our rice and vegetable leaves. So how are we going to get it?'

'Not much money in this camp,' I said.

'I've worked that out,' he said. 'The working men are paid'.

'Not much hope there,' I said, '10 cents a day! They can't get much for that. Perhaps a couple of bananas'.

'No,' he said, 'but the Officers are paid through Cox's Bank, London and they might have a bit to spare'.

'The Japs don't pay them, do they?' I said, in amazement.

'Oh yes', he said. 'From what I've heard, they give them about half of what they should have, the rest they claim, is for their board and keep'.

'What board and keep?' said I. 'Starvation rations and a leaf hut.'

'About what I've been saying,' said Tom. 'They seem to be the only ones in the camp who could spare a little money and as they no longer have Batmen (Personal Servants) to look after them, they could be pleased with a bit of help in patching up their clothes. It's either that, or risking our lives trading with the natives outside the camp fence.'

'Anyway,' he continued, 'it's worth a try and is something we can do'. 'I can't sew,' I said. 'I can,' he said, 'it's about time you learned'.

We discussed this at length and it was decided that I would go round the two Officers huts, asking for work. He would do the repairing and teach me to sew, in case we got more than he could cope with.

The Road to Recovery

The following morning I set out, with some trepidation, to try our scheme. I didn't like invading the living quarters of the Officers, for whom I held respect. I also felt like a beggar asking for alms. I walked through the first hut asking if anyone had any sewing or darning to be done, without avail, and thought this is not going to work. In the second hut, however, I got two pairs of socks and a request to patch up a mattress, on which the cover had rotted in places. How this Officer had managed to get this mattress up into Thailand, I don't know. The Japs did not provide transport. With some elation, I returned to our hut and said to Tom that we were in business. I had quoted 10 cents, (about ¾ pence) for each of the pairs of socks and 30 cents (¾ pence) for the mattress.

Tom helped me to carry the mattress to our hut and we set about our work, using a pocket from one of our only pair of shorts, to patch the mattress and pull out wool, to repair the socks, from a pair which I had kept to wear when we were released. We completed and returned these items and with the 40 cents returned to the hut. On Tom's advice we spent 20 cents on 4 bananas and kept 20 cents to buy materials for our trade. Our lifeline had been established.

During the next month the camp started to fill up with prisoners returning from their task in the jungle. Like ourselves, they were all in a bad state of health. A number died during their journey down river and were carried off the river boats and occasional trains, into which they had been packed like Sardines, with very little space to move. Many died shortly after their arrival. A notice board was put up outside a central hut, which acted as a mortuary, so that we could check on our former comrades and friends. This often contained a daily total of up to 20 men. Amongst those arrivals were a number of officers who were allocated a further two huts. Word had gone round the officers' huts, about our sewing and darning service and in consequence, we found ourselves with more work than we could cope with. George, our Norfolk friend was, we found, good

with a needle and as this work meant the ability to buy some food, a necessity to his survival, he gladly accepted our offer of work.

We needed more cotton and worn out clothing with which to do our mending. Also old socks to pull out for wool. We had until then managed to buy, for a few cents each, a few pairs of worn out trousers, out of which we pulled the pockets for patching, as this was the only part of any clothing which had not rotted and about the only material still capable of wear. We also bought an odd reel of cotton. All of which had been bought from the men in our hut. Now that we had more work, this source of supply was quickly being exhausted. We decided that I should canvas for these materials, in other huts. So my mornings were taken up, firstly in canvassing for work in the officers' huts and then going round other huts in the camp, calling out for old trousers, cotton and socks. We had already tried to obtain cotton by pulling this out from webbing belts, but found this of little use, as it was too thick and tore the weak cloth, with which we had to make our patches. So we were in effect passing on some of our earnings to other unfortunates around the camp and thus slightly improving the economy, and our health, by taking and distributing a small amount of the money, from Cox's Bank, London. This, as I have already mentioned, was reduced at source by the 50% which the Japanese kept for ‘board and lodgings’.

The days crept on. We were now in the month of October and it was the dry season. The sun shone down on us unmercifully and we kept in the shade of the huts, as much as possible, between 11am and 3pm. Fortunately, the Japanese did not call us out for work. We were able to continue our work of sewing, and darning, and slept during the heat of the early afternoon.

Towards the end of October a group of Japanese medical men swept into the camp and the following day we were called out to have stool tests taken. The results of these tests proved that a large number of us were suffering from amoebic dysentery. Those amongst us, the majority, were moved to huts in another part of the camp, in an attempt to segregate the infected ones from the few who were negative. This had little effect, as we were able, in this open camp, to mingle with one another. A month or so later, we found out the cause of this unusual concern which our captors had for our health, when the Japanese called for groups of men, amongst those not effected with dysentery, to be transported to Japan, for work in their coal mines and dockyards. At this time, I was relieved that Tom and I were not amongst the so called ‘fit men’ and even more thankful when news came, through the grapevine, some time later that

some of the ships carrying these prisoners, in overcrowded holds, had been sunk by USA submarines, with the loss of many lives.

Throughout November and into December we carried on, and our business kept us reasonably busy. We obtained work on most days and I purchased the materials from men in other huts. The worn out clothing was in a filthy condition. Often thick with the matted sweat and dirt of months of toil in the jungle, it was necessary to wash them. We ripped out the strongest of the material, mostly just pockets, and used these. Again, we enlisted the help of a friend, Ted, a Welshman from Cardiff. Short in stature, and like us all, as thin as a rake. He was pleased to get a cut in our takings and went down to the river each day to 'Dhobi' this material, by the soaking and bashing on rocks method. The sun completed the cleaning, by drying and fading it.

Ted had lived a hard life and was as tough as you could make them. He had run away to sea at a young age and worked on tramp steamers, where conditions and food were poor. After being called up, he had joined the Corps of Signals, hoping to become a wireless operator, but had finished up as a Linesman, laying telephone cables. He had gone ‘absent without leave’ on a number of occasions and had spent periods of his army service in military prisons or ‘glass houses’, on account of various misdemeanours. He had tried, before leaving England, to get a discharge from the Army, by acting mad. He had been eventually admitted to a Military Hospital for psychiatric treatment, before his ruse was found out, and he was quickly returned to his Unit. Becoming a prisoner of war, and the hard labour in the jungle with no means of escape, had been the last straw in his short life. Ted often became melancholy and would climb the odd leafless tree in the camp, looking down upon the crowds of prisoners – his form of freedom. He mingled with Tom, George and myself, and I think was happy to do so, not only for the extra food he could get, with his share of the profits, but to have friends who he could trust. He unfortunately died of blackwater fever before his release, whilst on a working party in a swampy area of Thailand. He was then just 24 years of age, and we did not hear of his death until this bad news was passed on to us after our release. Even then, we were so used to death that we accepted such news as a natural outcome. 'Oh, shame he didn't make it,' was our usual comment. Though we did think of him from time to time.

The camp had become full to capacity, with men wandering around in a nearly naked state. All were just bags of bones, with ribs projecting from their thin chests. Apart from the few working men, who did the necessary work of hauling wood, water and food for the camp, we were all left to our own devices. This

idle life gave many the opportunity to rest and to a degree, recuperate from the arduous work in the jungle. Though the majority were weak, in their fight to overcome the diseases with which they were afflicted. The cemetery, on the small hill to the north of the camp, was still receiving daily visits, when the sound of the 'Last Post' from the camp bugler, sounded out across the camp. Lists of the dead had ceased, as there were now only one or two, daily. Nevertheless, there were at least 500 new graves on that hill since September.

Christmas 1943

Christmas was almost upon us, when we heard that the officers were producing a play for the occasion, and that the men were thinking of other amusements. Christmas morning arrived and after a larger than usual breakfast, we all started to assemble around the middle of the camp. There was an air of excitement. Everyone was chatting and joking. The Australians had set up a few 'Two up' schools and were calling out for anyone to bet on the two coins tossed into the air. 'Heads or tails' was the cry and those with a few cents to gamble were attempting to increase their wealth. Racketeers were selling their rice based coffee and other morsels at lower than normal prices. Some men dressed themselves up as women and wandered about amongst us. The atmosphere became somewhat similar to a country fair or fete.

At about 3pm, after the heat of the day, the main event, a Donkey Derby, took place. The fittest men carrying the lightest men they could find, raced across a 50 yard stretch, in race after race, whilst bookies called out for bets, at varying odds, on each race. In the evening out cooks had, by holding back some of our rations for a week or so, managed to provide a good meal, with fried rice cakes to add to our rice and vegetable leaf stew. After this we retired to our huts to chat over the events of the day, and our usual topic of release. Our hopes of an early end to the war were discussed and our spirits rose as one after another declared that it wouldn't be long now. Few could have believed that we had another 20 months to endure.

Boxing Day dawned and we had the Officers' play, “The Importance of being Earnest”, a farce which had been at Theatres in Britain and had played at the West End in London for a considerable time. We, of course, did not expect this to be an outstanding success, as we knew the limitations which the producers had to contend with. No stage, no props, no materials with which to make the many articles required and, of course, no women to play three of the leading

roles. Nevertheless, as evening approached, we looked forward to this break in our dull lives.

After our evening meal of the usual rice and leaf stew, there was a general drifting of almost everyone in the camp, to the site on which this play was being performed, an area where there was a slight dip in the ground. To our astonishment, we found a real open air theatre had been constructed at the side of the dip, in a position in which all sitting around could see. How the Officers had managed this I don't know, I can only think that it was constructed from the bamboo platforms on which they normally lay in their huts.

This stage, in the form of a half circle, was back-clothed in dark materials, about 20 blankets I should think and the front had moving curtains, in a lighter material. Around the front of the stage was a row of benches, taken up by men with musical instruments. A big drum, 2 small drums, all made in native fashion, lying flat on the ground. Violins and cellos of different pitches, and a few other instruments, made up the string section. All these instruments had been painstakingly made from bits of wood, some from old tea chests and bits of wire found around the camp.

After the audience of about 600 men and, to our surprise, a few Japanese soldiers were seated on the ground around the stage, this orchestra of handmade instruments struck up with a mixture of classical items, including marches, and to our delight, 'Land of Hope and Glory'. We sat with amazement, the music was good. Hardly a note out of tune. How did they manage it with these crude instruments?

The curtains slowly opened as, firstly, the two male actors entered dressed in Edwardian costumes, followed, one by one, by the three ‘lady’ actors, introducing the first part of their Victorian farce. There was hardly a sound from the audience, as we sat spellbound at these elegantly dressed actors and ‘actresses’. The males wearing flannels and open necked white shirts and the ‘females’ wearing long flowing gowns and managing to speak in falsetto tones. At the end of each of the three parts there was uproarious approval and loud clapping, followed by a lot of chattering amongst ourselves, mainly on the magnificence of the players, particularly those taking the female roles. We unanimously agreed that whilst watching we could not think of them as men, but as very charming ladies. We also voiced our wonder at the costumes. Where had they got the materials?, in a camp in which the normal dress had been reduced to a bush hat, a piece of cloth round the loin and either bare feet or

sandals made of wood with webbing slats for toe holds. To the best of our knowledge, apart from a few who still had a pair of shorts, or a worn out shirt amongst their few belongings, there was no other clothing in the camp. The only thing that we could think of was that the Officers had put together some of their scant money and persuaded natives, outside the camp, to sell them some cloth.

Eventually, the final curtain came and the orchestra with the introduction of a roll on the drums played 'God save the King', to which about 600 ribbed, brown men, stood to attention with pride, and some apprehension as to how the Japanese would react to this slap in the face. Surprisingly, no reprisals were taken, perhaps because they had also enjoyed this night out.

We all left for our huts in high spirits. Nothing could have done us more good. We had, for two hours, been transplanted into another world. The freedom we all so wished for. That ended a remarkable Christmas for us in this Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. We were not forced out to work without respite, as we had always been in the jungle, and we had managed amongst ourselves, to produce good entertainment.

The New Year, 1944, came and we were still not called out for work. For almost three months we had been able to rest and, to a certain degree, recover from our ordeals. Our little group of 'Tailors' were improving in health. Thanks to the odd egg, or banana, etc., which we were able to purchase with our earnings. Tom, a real humanitarian, suggested that we split our profits again, to provide a little extra for those who were seriously ill in the ‘hospital’ huts. We agreed, and as we already knew of a few of these men from our unit, the Corps of Signals, we started to take an item or two, in an endeavour to give them the interest and extra nourishment to survive.

A week or so into the New Year, I was doing my rounds, touting for work, when an Officer called me over, and presented me with a khaki drill kit bag. These bags were used to contain our tropical kit – shorts, shirts, topi etc. – and had been issued to us before we left England. They were white in colour, and of a much less rigid canvas than the normal black ones. The Officer said, 'Ah! Tailor, can you make me a pair of shorts from this?'

I hesitated, whilst fingering the material. He had called me 'Tailor', that meant that he thought I could. Neither of us had been employed as tailors and had no

knowledge of cutting or design. Patching and darning we were now quite accomplished at. Nevertheless, I answered: 'We will have a try Sir'.

I quoted him 1.50 tickle, about 6 pence. A fortune to us. He agreed. and I wandered back to our hut.

On reaching Tom, I said, 'Now we're in it'.

'What?' said Tom.

'I have taken on the making of a pair of shorts from this'.

'God', said Tom, 'how the hell do you think we can do that?'

A bit later that morning, Tom, who had been putting on his thinking cap, came to me and said, 'I think we have solved it. I have been asking around, and have found a bloke down the hut, who was a cutter in Civvy Street (civilian life). I have asked him, and he is willing to cut them – for 50 cents.'

The cutting was done and George, the best at sewing, took on the job of sewing to completion. We couldn't get buttons, so we just left a suitable sized slit, which we over-bound with spare canvas. The waistband was also made up from material left over from the cutting, as were four belt loops. The finished product, after a wash, looked quite good. Well, good that is, for prisoner-of-war garb. It took off, and we got further orders from officers who had, or had managed to get, khaki drill kit bags. For the next few weeks we were quite busy and a number of our shorts were appearing around the camp. The result of this was that we started to have some money, and were able to buy more food.

Just before the end of 1943 a large hut had been erected in the centre of the camp and we were surprised to hear that this was to be a native-run canteen for prisoners. It had now been opened and the smell of boiling coconut oil came from inside. We investigated and found that small items of cooked rice and river fish were available. Fried in the oil, they seemed delicious. The price, about 2 pence in sterling, was, however, out of the reach of about 90% of the men in the camp. We were now in the fortunate 10%, largely made up of officers and Australians, who always seemed to have money.

With our new found 'wealth' we were able to buy fried fish to mix with our rice ration. Unfortunately, I did not know the effect this fried fish would have on my

stomach, which was still in the process of healing. After about three meals of rice and fried fish, I started to sweat, my stomach distended and I was into a severe bout of dysentery. I reported to a medical officer, who asked me to move myself to the ‘hospital’ hut. I picked up my belongings and with Tom's help transferred myself to the ‘hospital’ hut, where I found a space on the bamboo platform, on which to lie. This hut was fairly spacious and not overcrowded. There was an Orderly in attendance. But apart from that it was no better than the hut I had come from. The M.O. – a Major Black, visited once daily.
He examined me and said, ‘You know, of course, that you have a recurrence of your dysentery. I have no medicines and can only advise you. You cannot do without food, but eat only a spoonful each meal, and drink as much as you can get. Rest and a very light diet is the only way. It's up to you. The Orderly will help you if you ask him.'

He left, leaving me quite dejected. I knew it must be serious for me to be there and made up my mind to fight it off. I rested and gave my stomach every consideration. Holding it every time I moved and on, my regular walks to relieve my bowels in the slit trench, which served as a toilet. After about three days I started to improve. My stomach seemed easier and I had reduced the number of visits to the slit trench each day. This improvement continued, very slowly, until about ten days later I found I could eat a little without the ensuing pain. I was, by this time, quite weak from lack of food but I increased my intake little by little, whilst at the same time watching for the effect this rice had on me. By the third week I was feeling better. Though my stomach was not yet right.

The M.O. examined me, at intervals. He told me at one visit that I was low on blood and that he would try to do something about this. At his next visit he said he had found a blood donor. I wondered how he had done this, in a camp full of half-starved men. That evening I was told by the Orderly that I was to have a blood transfusion the following day. During the early afternoon of the following day, a bamboo pole with a crossbar was fixed up on the ledge which served as my bed, followed a short time after by the M.O. in conversation with a man about 10 years older than myself. From this man's conversation I knew he was Scottish. At the M.O.s request this man lay down on the bamboo ledge beside me and said, 'Hello. I think you are going to get some of my blood.'

I said, 'Thanks. I don't know whether you can spare it.'

He said, 'I can soon make it up again. Anyway, I have been promised a mug of tea, with sugar in it.'

A bottle was brought up the hut by the Orderly. It had a cork fixed in the neck, with a long rubber tube projecting through the cork into the bottle. The M.O. produced a short knife from a handkerchief passed to him by the Orderly and, with the aid of this, managed to get a needle into the Scotsman's arm. The bottle slowly filled. The needle was removed from his arm and, after immersion in boiling water, was placed back into the tube. The bottle was then tied to the crossbar of the bamboo pole at the side of me and the needle inserted into my arm. A few minutes later the Scotsman rose from the bed and said, 'Cheerio then laddie. You're now half Scottish. Good stuff that. Hope it does the trick.'

I said, 'Thank you. I hope so. Hope you will be OK.'

He said, 'Dinna worry. I'll soon be right'.

At which he strolled out of the hut.

I was left looking at the bottle and the blood slowly receding, until about half an hour later, when the bottle was almost empty, the needle was removed from my arm. I began to get very cold and developed an ague – shivering violently for a time. Then I became hot and developed a sweat. I thought this could be the end, but slowly the sweat subsided and I returned to normal. That evening I lay in the darkened hut and, apart from the usual trips to the slit trench, which considerably weakened me, I lay thinking. Most of my fellow sufferers were in a bad state and there was little conversation. The following morning, after a reasonably good night, I awoke refreshed. I also felt warmer and stronger that I had since I went sick. I found, throughout the day and in the following few days, that my trips to the toilet had reduced and that I had my first feelings of hunger.

My trips at night had been the worst, since it meant not only walking but finding the way, with the fear always that I might fall into that maggot infested slit trench. I remembered later, however, that there was some lifting of the soul, even in the direst straits. I can recall one night, when the moon was full, sitting on a bamboo pole which had been erected above the slit trench and looking at the sky, in its tropical glory, with all the stars shining around that golden orb – the moon. I had easily found my way and could see my direction. I sat and thought of religion. Surely, there must be a supreme being of some sort. What, or who, could produce, or make, such a terrific show. No human, that was for sure. The night was warm, even though I had only a piece of cloth to cover my

nakedness. A slight breeze provided the air conditioning and, apart from a quiet stirring in the camp, all was silent. Yes, one can find solace, even in the darkest pit.

I continued to improve and my strength increased, to the point where I could walk round the hut. Three days later Major Black, who was an Australian M.O., informed me that, if I took it steady, I could return to my hut. After he left, I picked up my few belongings and walked the short distance to my hut, where Tom had left a space on the bamboo platform for me. He had been visiting me daily and, during the worst part of my illness, had told me not to pack it in, 'Keep at it. Don't let it get you. We're not going to be prisoners for long now. I've heard that our troops are on the Thai Border. I've left you a bed space in the hut'. I knew that bit about our troops being on the Thai border, was just encouragement, having used something similar to encourage sick men myself.

Tom came into the hut shortly after I arrived.

He said, 'Good, you're back then.'

‘Yes, and I'm not sorry,' I said.

'You will be. Should have stayed in,' he said. 'Not that I'm sorry you’re back. The Nips (Japanese) are up to it again. They are moving most of us. Rumour has it that some are being sent to Japan and others to working camps a few miles away. Thought you would be better out of the way, for a time.'

George, our Norfolk friend, followed him and welcomed me back. He said that our tailoring business had gone off a bit during my absence.

'Don’t think the Officers recognised us when we went around. Anyway, won't make much difference if we're on the move.'

'Where's Ted?' l said.

'Most likely up a tree', said Tom. 'He’s been a bit morose since he heard we are moving.'

The following day we saw a list of the fitter men who were to be moved in a week’s time and breathed a sigh of relief as none of our names appeared on it.

George said, 'Seems as though we're not needed yet'.

Tom, who had been thinking it over, said, 'That lot's on the way to Japan. The Nips don't want our amoebic dysentery'.

'Perhaps they're going to leave us here,' said Ted, hopefully.

'Not likely,' I said, 'I think our rest days are over.

'Tom said, ''Yes. You know these little yellow bastards. They'll clear us all out now they've started.'

A few days later his prediction was confirmed when further lists were put up, on which all our names were included. To my dismay, my name was on a separate list to that of Tom and Ted. My list was headed 'Convalescent Camp', on which George was also listed. The other lists gave only dates of departure, with no mention of destination. I came away in disgust and said, 'I'm going to get transferred onto your list Tom'.

He said, 'Don't be daft,' and called me to one side. 'Look,' he said, 'if you want to finish up in a rice sack, just go ahead. You don't know where we're going. One thing is sure, if it isn't convalescence, it's working, and you won't last long at that. It's only a few days since I thought you'd had it. Use your head.'

'I am not going to separate,' I said.

'If you try this,' he said, ''you're not only risking your life, you might land up on some other list, and anyway you will have George with you.'

I nodded my head. I knew that our officers, mainly medical officers, had been given the task of selecting the men to go on each party, and thought I may have been able, through my medical officer, Major Black, to arrange a transfer. He had, no doubt, had a hand in getting me on this convalescence list. I considered this and Tom's warnings, for about 24 hours and eventually decided to leave it to fate. I felt guilty about leaving Tom to his fate but came to the conclusion that I would probably be more of a hindrance to him than a help, if I became seriously ill again. A few days later I packed my odds and ends and prepared to move out.

The following morning Tom slapped me on the back and said, 'Best of luck. Pleased you took my advice. Hope to see you when release comes. Can't be long now.'

'Well, you know how I feel. I'll try to keep in touch. Look after yourself and don't let them get the better of you,' I said.

We had split up our materials of trade, as Tailors – scissors, cotton and needles – which, as it happened, we did not use again. George shouted down the hut that we had better get moving as the Japs were starting to count outside. Tom and Ted watched as we joined those to go. They followed us to the gates of the camp and waved us off, with further wishes for good luck. George and I stumbled our way across to the railway line. Neither of us had much strength left, which applied to all of the party bound for the Convalescent Camp. We scrambled into the goods wagons in the sidings, and after about half an hour, were on our way. Some two hours later we arrived at the junction of the Malay and Siamese railways. Out of the wagon door we saw a camp and a number of prisoners of war working around the large number of tracks, in this busy marshalling yard. We found out that this place was Nom-Pladuk and were told to get out. I thought, Oh! They have got us here to work. However, we were told to move, and were led to a road. Well, more of a cart track than a road. It was mainly hard baked soil with bits of rock thrown onto it, as were most of the roads in Thailand at that time. Here we waited for at least an hour, when two Bedford 30 cwt trucks arrived, taken when we had surrendered, and driven by prisoners-of-war with a Jap guard sitting in the front. We were loaded into the trucks, filling them to capacity, and started a thoroughly bumpy and jolting journey of some 20 – 30 miles to our convalescent camp. We were all suffering from ailments, and were very relieved when the trucks came to a halt outside the gates of the camp.

Nong-Compatant

Nong-Compatant is the nearest I can get to a British pronunciation of the name of this camp, which was surrounded on all sides by thin pointed bamboo poles, held together by horizontal bamboo poles, to which the thin poles were lashed in an upright position, with the pointed edges at the top, making it very difficult to climb over without being spiked. The camp was built in an area of about a quarter mile square, by the side of a large Buddhist Temple, with a dome, which overlooked the whole camp. The dome

looked very similar to, and about the same height as, St Paul's in London, except for the fact that it was heavily decorated with golden and red ornamentations. At first it gave me a feeling of security and calm, but after a short time its continuous presence, overlooking the whole of the camp and shadowing us for most of the day from the light of the sun, produced in us a feeling of unease. The occasional tinkling of its bells and beating of drums did little to improve this.

This was a newly built camp of about 40 huts. About the same size as those we had been used to, with a variation in construction. Instead of leaves, the sides were made of timber, as were the ledges on which we slept. The Japs may have thought this to be an improvement, but wood, being less springy than bamboo, was harder to rest our boney bodies on. We were guided to a vacant hut, where we found a good area to settle in and lay down on the hard boards to rest-off the exertion of our journey, with our one blanket under us and our almost empty packs for pillows. George and I found a place together, and upon waking started to discuss our new surroundings.
Our neighbour, Bert, who was from the Royal Engineers, tapped the wooden platform and said, 'Bloody hard isn't it? Smells like new wood'.

We shuffled off the platform and walked out of the hut to investigate the camp, the occupants of which informed us that it had been in use for just over a month, taking in the men seriously ill from the working camps. It also contained a number of men with amputations of limbs and arms, caused by jungle ulcers, which because of lack of nourishment, and lack of medical supplies had developed into gangrene, making it imperative to resort to surgical treatment. A large number of men died before this harsh treatment could be performed, through a lack of anaesthetics and the absolutely unhygienic conditions of the huts in which these operations took place.

The food in this camp was, as usual, just rice and once a day, vegetable leaf stew. The guards were very docile, avoiding us as much as possible, probably through fear of infection. There seemed very few of them, and we were left very much to ourselves, only seeing a Japanese guard when they were crossing from their compound in one corner of the camp. The Japs were continuing their code of conduct to the sick. A sort of ‘patient heal thyself’ cult, without the provision of medical supplies or extra food to supply vitamins. About a week after our arrival in this camp, however, we did get a shock, when six very thin and unhealthy looking cows were driven into a stockade just outside of our hut and we heard that these were for our cookhouse. We were sorry for these poor

animals. The stockade was in the full heat of the sun for some hours during each day and no-one appeared to be watering them. Neither was any grass, or hay, being provided.

The day after they arrived, we prisoners, having some knowledge of such deprivation, decided to do something about this. A number of men, from our hut, went out into the camp, picking at small patches of grass, which were tucked away at the sides of the huts. Others, ourselves included, carried water from the only water supply in the camp - a small pond, in which we had bathed until we were told not to, as we could be passing on deadly diseases. Being the only available water we carried this to the cattle, who drank it with great gusto. The cows were slaughtered at the rate of one a week and boiled with our leaf stew. It was not at all tasty, perhaps because of our close association with these animals. We ate it, as we ate anything edible, thinking it would be good for us. It was, after all, the only meat we had during our three and a half years of captivity.

I stayed in this camp for about three months and there is little I can say about it. We did not work and spent our days wandering around the limited confines and resting, or chatting, on our wooden platforms. Trying, more mentally than physically, to improve our health. There was one happening in this camp which I can easily recall. About two weeks before I was moved to a working camp. This was both a frightening and uplifting experience.

One morning we heard the heavy drone of a number of airplanes. A sound which we had not heard since the Battle of Singapore, when Japanese bombers came over regularly, in squadrons of twenty seven, to blanket bomb our positions. The planes came into view, flying in 'V' formation, 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1. The largest we had seen. They flew directly in line for our camp. At which we did the natural thing, jumping into the deep rain ditches built to withstand monsoon rain around our huts. As they approached we saw the stars, emblems of the USA air force, on their wings. 'They're Flying Fortresses. Blimey! They are coming for us', shouted someone down the trench.

Like many around me, I thought, 'Oh! Have we gone through all this just to be blasted to pieces by our own bombers?' They flew directly over and circled a mile or so past the camp. Then started, what we knew was a bombing run, increasing speed, whilst losing height. This is it, we thought, getting down below the ground. Again the mighty roar, as they passed overhead and we realised that they were not bombing us. A few minutes later, when the sound of

their engines were fading, we heard the enormous explosion of what must have been 2 or 3 hundred heavy bombs, dropping within a space of one minute. The ground around us shook with the impact. But we were safe and still alive.

That evening we had confirmed that which we expected, when wounded P.O.Ws were sent to our camp. The marshalling yards at Nong-Pladuk had been hit and severely damaged.
From the wounded we learned that the planes had tried to avoid the P.O.W camp at the marshalling yards, but had hit one corner of the camp, killing a few men and wounding about fifty. The more serious of those were sent to our camp. Some of them died within a few days of arriving. The marshalling yards and Japanese camp were flattened and most of the rolling stock destroyed. We had got over our fright of that morning and were now in a jubilant mood. This was our first concrete evidence that our forces were able to fly all that distance, from Burma, without Japanese attack and we knew that this sign of mastery in the air, was a prelude to the defeat of the Japs, as it had been for us when the Japs had control of the air over Singapore.

I had not heard of my impending departure from the camp at this time and think that the new intake of those wounded and some others over the next few days, hastened this. I heard about three days later, that I was to move at the early part of the next week. George was also on the list and we spent some of our waiting time trying to guess where we would land up, this time. On the appointed day, we wondered across to the camp gates, where with our few belongings and about 20 other P.O.Ws we were loaded into a truck, which took us along the bumpy road to Nong-Pladuk. We had only one guard. The Japs didn't bother too much, about guarding us at this time, as they, and we knew that we hadn't the strength to attempt an escape.

We arrived at Nong-Pladuk, which was a real shambles. Bomb holes everywhere with P.O.Ws working around them. Some filling in the holes. Others moving debris. We were taken through this to a point about a mile on the other side, where the railway track had not been disturbed. Here we found a few engines and an assortment of goods trucks. We were loaded into one of the open trucks and left to wilt in the sun, for an hour or so, before one of the engines was attached to our train and we were again on our way. Fortunately, we always carried our water. Some in water bottles issued to us with our kit in England.

Others, who had lost these, used any container. Tin cans, bottles, hollowed out Bamboo canes etc. We also knew from experience, how to eke out our water, by swallowing only one mouthful at a time. We were never sure when we would get more.

Tamarkan

During the late afternoon, we arrived at a camp known as Tamarkan. Our little group were hurried to the gates, where our rather meek guard stopped at the guard hut. He immediately turned, bowed deeply to the senior Jap on guard and, shouting, in a stiff manner, announced his number of men and where from, in the usual Japanese military manner. He stood, whilst the guard senior walked, in a superior manner, over to us and counted. We were then marched off to a hut and left to our own devices.

George and I took a look round the lines of bamboo huts and almost simultaneously said, 'Working Camp. Back to norm.'
We recognised the types of Korean guards, noted for their sadistic manner, and the way in which the huts were packed to capacity, that we were no longer considered sick. We decided to look for Tom. We had discussed the possibility of landing up in the same camp as him and put it at about 20 to 1. The working parties were not yet back in the camp, but a number of prisoners were about, mainly the sick and the camp workers. We started to ask about him, going from hut to hut. After a time we reached a hut, in which one of the men knew him and, to our delight, said that he was out on a working party. He pointed out Tom's sleeping place. Sitting on Tom's bed space we waited for his return. We didn't have long to wait. Within half an hour a crowd of men came, slowly, into the hut and settled to rest on the bamboo platforms. Amongst these we recognised Tom, who seemed thinner, if that was possible.

He saw us and said, 'They've sent you back then'.

He slumped on the ledge and said, 'Good to see you. Hold on for a bit, until I have relaxed'.

Stretching out his legs and closing his eyes for about half an hour, he eventually started to talk. 'This place isn't too bad. We work from 8am to 6pm. Not as bad as the railway but in our condition it's a struggle. You've improved a bit. Put on some weight. They'll soon take that off. Have to do some covering for you.'

We knew that 'covering' meant grouping up in the line of the guards' vision, when someone needed to rest. We had done this often, whilst working on the railway, to give the sick a rest. It was not easy and could cause a beating up of the coverers and the covered, if the guard discovered the ruse.

The following morning George and I joined Tom on the work parade, where about 200 men were lined up to be split into work groups. Here we had to be numbered off, in Japanese, about a dozen times, until the illiterate guards were satisfied that they had the right number of prisoners. All the guards were Koreans, which meant that they were about the same height as ourselves. Although, they had the same looks and sallow complexion, as the Japanese, who were, on average, almost a foot shorter in height.

The Koreans were used to guarding us, as we were considered to be the lowest of the low, not having committed hari-kari when we surrendered to them. We were used to Korean guards whilst working on the railway and the Japs had picked a large number of sadists. Nevertheless, there were a few amongst them who were more humane. A beating up from one of the more sadistic ones, was far worse than from one of the Japs, who because of their short height were lighter and less powerful than the Koreans.

Yes, we had learned a lot in the Jungle. I was a little perturbed when I found that the senior guard was one known as the Kin-Sao Gorilla or Yasimoto, to give his real name. Towards the end of my time on the railway, I had done a three week stint at Kin-Sao and though I had not worked under him, I knew of his reputation as one of the worst. There were a few of these guards, who through a wish to curry favour with their masters, the Japanese, or through pure sadism, were continually looking around for some excuse to beat up prisoners. These were usually the sick and weak, who offered them an excuse, by their inability to sustain the rigours of heavy labour. So, he was at it again. Strutting up and down amongst us. Bellowing orders and insults, at the top of his voice and occasionally slapping, with full force, the ones who displeased him, so forcefully, that he knocked the weaker ones to the ground, so that he had the added pleasure of kicking them to their feet again.

This particular sadist eventually met his fate when we were released. Mainly because of an incident at Kin-Sao, when he beat a sick Australian to death with the Butt of his rifle. The Australians, there and then, vowed to get him. This

they did in a camp near the aerodrome at Bangkok, to which I was sent after release.

I adopted my usual role on this parade, keeping a low profile, and escaped his evil eye. Tom, who as I have said, was quick witted and able to think things out, had placed us in a position towards the end of the ranks. He had noticed that the worst guards took the first parties, and put us in this position, in the hope of getting the more humane ones. We were lucky, being in the last 20 men, and were given a middle-aged Korean who seemed to have lost interest in this war. In fact, when we broke off during the day for a rest, this guard put it across to us – by gesticulation and an occasional word of English – that he wanted to get home to his wife and children and the sooner this war was over, the better for him.

It was about October 1944 and we spent six months on these work parties, going out each day with a rest day in every 10 days. The work was much easier than we had experienced in the jungle. The Japs seemed to have difficulty in finding enough for us to do and put us to silly tasks on some days, just to say we were working. We had different guards and used the cover system when we were in the charge of the sadistic types. Sometimes covering and at other times being covered.

At the end of the six months, around May 1945, exciting rumours of the end of the war in the west, went quickly round the camp. We heard that Germany had surrendered to the allies, and this time, it was said to be the 'Gen' (genuine news). Even our officers agreed that it was right and we were aware that someone, a signals officer it was thought, had made up a wireless set from bits and pieces and was getting occasional news, which was circulated only to a group of officers who could be trusted not to disclose the source of information. We awaited the reaction of the Japs, but apart from being a little more subdued, they carried on as usual, with working parties daily. We also heard, at about the same time, that the Japs were retreating in Burma. Rumour had it that our troops had almost reached Rangoon. We discussed the situation at the end of our working days.

'Can't be long now,' said George, 'they won’t stand against the whole of the Americans and our forces.'

'They'll try. Even if it's only to save face,' said I.

Tom sat thinking and said, 'Whichever way. Hold your hats on. We've got to watch it. Keep calm and don't let them see you excited. You don't know which way the yellow buggers will jump, and we could be at risk'.

It wasn't until after our release that we found out how true this was. We were told, in a welcome back speech by Earl Mountbatten, in Rangoon, that around this time an order had been given to Japanese troops that in the event of British troops invading Thailand, they were to put all P.O.Ws to death.

A few weeks later, when some of the excitement had worn off, we found that our names were on a list for another move.

Journey to the Vietnam Border

On the day of departure, sometime at the beginning of June 1945, our group of about 100 men, all in very poor condition, stumbled to the train. Our train was an engine, much the worse for wear, and four covered goods wagons, also in a state of disrepair. We boarded, mainly with the aid of our comrades pushing us up, until we were able to roll into the trucks, and commenced a 10 day journey to a camp near the Indo-China (now Vietnam) border. Our journey was, to a certain degree, interesting, as it commenced through the more populated part of Thailand, passing a number of native villages. It also included a trip through the centre of Bangkok, which would cost a lot through a travel agent these days, especially as we had a three day stay in the dock area of this capital city. Travel agents would, however, find very few customers wanting this trip. Travelling conditions – abominable. Cuisine – non-existent. Accommodation – part of a dirty, run down warehouse, with concrete floors and absolutely no furniture. Toilets also non-existent (find your own corner).

Travelling along on our bumpy, jolting goods wagon was again giving us trouble with our stomachs. We could see the villages, composed mainly of bamboo and leaf huts, with narrow mud baked roads and paths separating the huts. Straw-hatted natives tending patches of ground on the outskirts of the village with, in some cases, a bullock to help with this back-breaking work. There was a calmness about those villagers, who worked at a very slow pace and appeared to do more talking than working. But then, their only cares were to grow enough food and occasionally repair their roofs, with palm fronds, readily available round the villages. A very hand-to-mouth life, occasionally enlivened by a

wedding, when most of the people in the village made the newly-weds (to be), a 'house' from the surrounding vegetation, and mainly bamboo and palm fronds, usually built above ground level, to avoid flooding at monsoon times. A very different life style to those of us who live in the, so called, developed countries, where there is far more stress in both the home and work situation. Still, though they live a less stressful life, most of them die at an earlier age than ourselves, by living in a tropical land and thus being subject to various deadly diseases.

Besides weddings, there are a number of Buddhist celebrations, at which it is again usual for all the villagers to provide the food and the drink, brewed from fermented rice and other vegetation and mostly highly intoxicating. So, they had something to break their daily toil in the fields and paddies. I forgot to mention that at these celebrations there was always the village band. A few men who played on drums, like the African drums, beating a rhythm to accompany those who played on home-made string instruments, whilst the remainder of the villagers, danced and sang to this Oriental music. Funny how we humans like a little music and song, to go with get-togethers. Not to mention a little of the hard stuff, to make us merry, and we manage to obtain these in even the poorest forms of existence.

Well! I had better get back to the goods wagon, which rolled on through that night and into the next day, with a few stops for fuel and water to feed the engine and on one occasion to provide us with a handful of cooked rice and a mug of tea. No sugar, no milk, just water on tea, but when you are very hungry and very thirsty anything tastes like nectar. Throughout that morning we rolled on through a more populated area with the odd small town, again mostly comprising of bamboo and leaf houses. This was no Cook's Tour, we were tired from trying to sleep in a semi-upright position, on a wooden floor, with nothing to protect our protruding bones from the jolting and jarring movement of these trucks. We were also sick, mainly from dysentery, which was made worse by this movement. We suffered from hunger and thirst, as we drained the last drops from our water bottles.

I can only remember occasional views of our surroundings, mainly when we passed habitations. We hoped that one of these was our destination, but this came eventually in the early afternoon. We started to pass ramshackle huts and buildings, and found we were the on the outskirts of a large town. Word went around that this was Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. Before reaching the main town, however, our train pulled into a siding, where coolies were moving goods

onto carts and river boats (Sampans). We climbed down from the railway trucks, with great relief. Stretching our legs to get them working again, we were then able to get some doubtful water.
Tom said, 'Pleased to get out of that stinking hole.'
'Yes – it's good to be able to breathe again,' I said.

The trucks had become very smelly over the last 24 hours. No toilets and continuous sweating had made the atmosphere very unsavoury and unhygienic. Still! We, as I have said before, accepted everything as a matter of course. We were still alive and struggling on. After a short time, our guards, just two, short, middle aged Japs, came hurriedly up to us. Shouting in high pitched voices, 'Go, Go, Go – Speedo'. Though, in our early days of P.O.W life, we had been told that we must always speak in the Japanese tongue, we had, by various methods, managed to get them to speak to us in a sort of pidgin English, just to remind them of our identity, regardless of the low state of health and cleanliness they had brought us to. This message, having been conveyed in English, we complied with and followed them to a dirt road on which stood four, or five, lorries, driven by P.O.Ws. We piled into these lorries and thus commenced a tour of Bangkok, lasting about half an hour.

Our journey took us alongside canals and waterways, which were crowded with small boats and busy people. Most of the boats were used as houses for the family owners and were the source of all kinds of rubbish, including sanitation being dumped into the water, which in this hot climate, did nothing to improve the atmosphere. We also went along narrow lanes, used as Bazaars, containing many small shops, with open fronts, on which the owners squatted to barter their goods with passers-by. There were also a few Eastern 'Cafes'. Again these were open-fronted, with one or two members of the family sitting over pots of burning charcoal, cooking, or frying sweetmeats in coconut oil. No tables, or chairs, but small mats, laid out around the charcoal pots for the customers to squat on whilst eating their delicacies.

We moved from this area, which could have been the centre of the town, to a better off area, where instead of small huts and wooden houses there were larger houses, on stilts, made mainly of wooden boards, with openings for windows and doors. Coming out of this area, we started to go past a circular wall, about eight feet in height. This wall was made of stone, and a type of cement, and was decorated on the sides with the top being set off with small, varied-colour statues. We were told, or guessed, that this was the surrounding wall of the King of Siam's Palace. Though we were unable to get a view of the

interior of this walled area. Shortly after passing this, we ran into a deserted and run down area, with occasional large buildings made from stone and cement, with very few window openings. We had reached our first destination. An empty warehouse, with a concrete floor, in the dock area.

Our journey through Bangkok is really only partly in my mind. We were ill, tired and hungry, and our stomachs had not fared well on this bumpy lorry. Fortunately, the crowded streets had kept us travelling slowly, at about 15 – 20 mph. We wearily climbed down from the lorries and the party of about 100 of us were directed to the warehouse. There we were left, by our guard to our own devices, with the large doorway wide open.
There was plenty of space for us all to lie down. As usual, our exhaustion overcame our hunger, and like cattle we lay down on this concrete floor with nothing to protect our bones but our one blanket. Some hadn't even got this and relied upon a worn out sack. This concrete floor was not only hard on our skeleton-like bodies, but even in this tropical climate, because of lack of daylight and the large open doorway, it was rather chilly.

Two large cans of tea were brought to the door. Who by, I don't know. We each had about half a mug of this warm brew and settled down to rest. It was sometime in the late afternoon, when we awoke by some stirring of our comrades, who were shuffling to the doorway, where food, boiled rice and leaf stew had arrived. Again I don't know by whom, or how, this had been delivered. We looked outside the warehouse, onto a bare patch of ground, with another building in the distance. No one was in sight. After our meal, we lay down with our hunger partly satisfied and after desultory conversation, again fell asleep, until dawn brought another day.

Slowly we got to our feet and walked around our warehouse, to ease the stiffness out of our sore bodies. Concrete is not soft to an almost naked body and certainly less yielding than the bamboo platforms we had been used to. Shortly after, we welcomed another meal of boiled rice and tea, and then got down to talking. What were we to do about latrines? We had, until now, used a corner of the bare patch nearest to the warehouse. There was no sign of the Japanese, but, like caged animals, we didn't want to go outside the confines of the cage our captors had put us into.
Tom said, 'You never know what the buggers are up to.' This echoed my thoughts, which were that there was a certain degree of safety in being together. In our poor condition, we could not afford to be beaten up, or shot, by going outside. Survival was our only aim.

'Queer situation,' said George, 'no sign of them since we got here.'

They had never deserted us before and rumours were flying around, 'Maybe they've capitulated and left us to be picked up.' With the war over in Europe this seemed quite a possibility. The pessimists amongst us put it around that they were finding us a liability and were trying to get rid of us.
'Don't think so,' said I, hopefully, 'they wouldn't provide food if that was the case.'
So like frightened sheep we kept together.

We solved the problem of latrines by finding a small door, which opened out to the bare ground at the far end of the warehouse and managed to scoop out a hole in the ground just outside, which was sufficient for the time being and felt safe. Our fears of the unknown were allayed in the evening of the second day, when one of the guards came with the food carriers. He indicated by pointing to the sky and the setting sun, that when it came up again, 'All men go'.

The following morning, after we had been given our rice and tea, and been given boiled water for our bottles, our two subdued guards led us about half a mile through rough roads to a railway siding. There were five or six open railway wagons, into which we were loaded. We waited in this siding, with the sun getting hotter and hotter, until at about midday we were connected to an engine with other loaded trucks.

At last we were on the move and apart from the smoke and occasional red hot embers, from the wood burning locomotive, we were able to cool off a little in the draught caused by the movement of the train. The tracks seemed to be more secure and better laid on this line and the train moved at a higher speed than on our line. Sometimes reaching 40 – 50 mph. We did not recognise any of the villages we were passing and gathered that we were now travelling in a different part of Thailand. Apart from two stops for water and fuel for the engine, we travelled the remainder of that day through open, mainly cultivated, land, with occasional large and small villages every mile or so. Natives looked up as we passed and then carried on with their backs bent, tending their crops. As darkness fell, we pulled into a siding in the middle of a large village, and were allowed down to stretch our legs and to be fed and watered, with the usual rice and tea.

We spent the night sleeping in cramped positions, on the wooden floors of the trucks. Early the next morning we again had our rice and tea, and were supplied

with a ration of water. Shortly after this, we were on the move and continued at a good speed through the agricultural landscape. At about midday, we started to move through a bushy and less populated area. We were approaching semi-jungle land. We knew we were going north, as Bangkok is in the south, and guessed quite rightly that we were on the way to the Indo-China border, which was later confirmed.

No-Name Camp

At about 4pm we pulled into a siding at the end of our journey. We took our time from the sun; our watches had all been bartered for food, whilst we struggled to keep alive when building the railway. We scrambled down from the sides of the truck, with the assistance of our comrades. Some could hardly walk, and were supported by a friend on each side of them. So, this group of skeleton-like, dark-brown bodies, stumbled along a track through the trees for about half a mile until we reached a small, newly built, bamboo and leaf camp, surrounded by a tall bamboo fence. We had reached 'No Name Camp', which we afterwards found was a short distance from the Indo-China (Vietnam) Border and was built in a clearing in this semi-jungle. 'No-Name' was the title we gave the camp, because neither the Japanese nor ourselves named it. Here we were to work for about two months, before we were released from this horrible existence. Here too, Tom, George and myself re-found our religion.

The camp was made up of about 12 long huts of the usual bamboo and leaf type, with bamboo platforms to lie on. There were some 50 men, P.O.Ws, who had constructed the huts and made the clearing. The Japanese guards, who were about 12 in number, with one Officer, all lived in one hut, in a corner near the gate. There were no Koreans. The remainder of us were housed in 8 huts, which gave us plenty of space. One hut was used for stores and the remaining two were, as far as I know, left empty. Perhaps to house other P.O.W.s, who never arrived. There was only one British officer, a Roman Catholic priest, who lived in the corner of one of the huts.

Perhaps, noticing our condition, the Japs gave us a day off, the day after our arrival. On the second day we were called out with some of the other men onto work parade, which meant we stood in three ranks to be counted, and handed over to four of the guards. We looked a sorry mess of ribbed, almost naked men trying to stand upright, to show them we were not yet beaten. From the camp

we marched, or stumbled, about ¾ mile through the thin jungle, to a spot which had been slightly cleared, and set to work to properly clear an area of about half a mile by 300 yards wide, which was to be a runway for Japanese planes. We were, of course, well experienced in this work from our railway building. Though by no means capable. The Japanese seemed to realise this, as we struggled to saw down trees and clear undergrowth. Apart from their usual shouted insults of disapproval, it was rare for them to go to the lengths of beating us up. We had the feeling that they were as fed up as ourselves with the war, or could they see the beginning of the end? One could almost believe that they had, at last, found compassion for us unfortunate humans.

There was no water in the camp, which had so far existed on supplies carried by camp workers for more than a mile. So a well had to be sunk. This was an essential for our survival, and upon agreement amongst ourselves we went out, after resting from our daily work, on two evenings in batches of four men at half-hourly intervals, to complete the digging out of this 9ft diameter and 200ft deep well. My only shift was at about 8pm on the last night, when, with another man, I was lowered by rope to the bottom of the shaft. Our only light, apart from the light of the moon, was from a couple of homemade oil lamps at about 50ft, which gave very little. The heat at the bottom of the well was intense, at least 30˚C. We dripped with sweat, as my partner used a pick, lifting it only to waist height, in the confined space, and dropping the point into the shale like soil. My task was to shovel the loose soil into a bucket, and to pull on the rope for it to be lifted. Within five minutes we were both shattered, and we had only filled about three buckets. At ten minutes we were dizzy from dehydration and we leaned against the wall, hoping they would lift us out before we collapsed. We neither spoke, but reserved what strength we had to hold onto the rope when it was next lowered. What a relief, when we got out to what seemed a cold night, but in fact was about 17–20˚C. We went back to our huts and flopped on to our bamboo platforms, to sleep until morning. The following morning we heard that the second shift, after us, had broken into water and the well was filling.

That evening we arrived back in camp after our work, and were given our rice and tea. Within a short time we all experienced pain on passing water, which we could only do in drips. We called it, 'Peeing broken bottles'. The shale from the well had not settled when the cooks used it. It was a few days before this pain cleared. Nevertheless, we were sent out every day to our work on the airstrip, where we put our water bottles upright on the ground and, regardless of thirst, did not drink the last inch or so.

For nearly two months we slowly cleared the half mile strip, towards the end of which we were put to levelling, by digging out, carrying, and tipping the soil. Except for the type of work, I remember very little of this. The first stage of clearing was easier than the levelling, as we were able to stand back and watch as the trees we felled dropped to the ground, giving us some relief. We also sawed in groups, which enabled us to take breaks off the cross cut saws. The levelling did not afford us this luxury, as we had those who dug and those who carried. The Japanese could watch us more closely and became belligerent when they saw us resting. We tried the covering up method, but we all needed cover and the Japs were more able to see us in the cleared area. So we struggled on digging out or carrying until we were ready to drop. Which many of us did, only to be forced back to work when we came round.

Tom, George and myself discussed the situation after we had recovered in the evenings. We were pretty certain that the German War had finished. This being so, Tom said of the Japanese, 'They are bloody idiots to carry on.'

'Yes,' said George, 'with all the armaments of the USA and ourselves they can't hope to win.'

I said, 'Well, you know they don't think straight, and are capable of allowing the slaughter of all their troops and ourselves, for that matter.'

Tom said, 'We can't stick this for long. Best thing is to do as little as possible on the working party and try to preserve what strength we have, for as long as we can.'

Fortunately, we were allowed one in ten days off work. We used this to rest and to carry out any jobs we needed to do for ourselves. We usually managed to wash ourselves, with a small amount of water, and to wash out the bit of cloth we used to cover our loins. During the afternoon of the second rest day, our only officer, the Roman Catholic Padre, came into our hut, and calling us around, started to talk about religion. He said that we knew he was the only padre in the camp, and that although he was a Catholic priest, he wanted to serve us all, regardless of creed. He wanted to put up a cross in an open area of the camp, and hopefully we would attend services on our day off. He said he would not carry out a Roman Catholic service but would hold it for all creeds. He knew that a lot of us had lost our faith in Christianity, which should be our common bond, and he hoped to persuade us that God did exist, and that we

should put our trust in him. He was going to hold talks on this subject in the corner of his hut every evening, starting that night, and would welcome atheists and Christians, regardless of creed, so that we could talk this out together. After he left, we three got to talking. We had had little or no time to talk of anything but survival, freedom and food. Each of us agreed that we still had a belief of a sort and that we often prayed before sleeping, for our freedom and our loved ones at home. We agreed to attend his talk that evening.

On going over to his hut that evening, we found a number of P.O.Ws gathered around his corner. He started by welcoming us, and then gave a little talk, in which he said his main theme was faith. He said that he understood why so many of us had lost our belief, or now doubted in the existence of a God. He had had battles with his own faith, while trying to do something for the dying, mainly whilst building the railway, where we had lost so many friends and comrades.
'There is a God,' said he, 'and though we cannot see or hear him, the evidence is all around us.'
'We only have to open our eyes.' He continued to speak of all, or most of us, being brought up in Christianity, and then spoke about other religions, Buddhism, Islam, etc. where there is always a God, or Supreme Being.

He talked for about half an hour, inviting us to ask questions. To which he answered, always finishing with faith, without which, he said, we had no crutch to lean on. At the end of his talk he asked us all to come outside and to open our eyes. It was evening. The last rays of the setting sun were all around us. 'Now, look around you. See that hill with all those trees. See the grass below you. You know that amongst these trees and in that grass there are millions of insects and many animals, who do not possess our intelligence.'

'Now!' pointing to a nearby teak tree, some 3ft at the base and at least 300ft high. 'Ask yourself one question. With all our knowledge and the machinery we have at our disposal, could we make just one tree like this? Could we, or anyone we know, produce even the small seed from which this magnificent tree was grown? Could we make insects and animals with all their circuits of blood, heart, lungs, and of so many varieties?'
He paused for a while and then said, 'Well, the answer must be, no-one on this earth. The next question is who or what? Scientists try to tell us it was evolution, chemicals, etc. Neither of these can be achieved without matter. Earth and Air. So we can go, on and on. There is only one answer; there must be a creator, a supreme being, a god. Far more intelligent and powerful than

anything we know. Why then, a number of you have asked, do we have to suffer at the hands of other men? My only answer is in the words, ‘intelligent’ and ‘powerful’. Surely with all that intelligence, He, or It, must have a purpose and that purpose may well be for the good of all. Whatever it is, I for one do not want to, and in any case cannot, argue with this supreme being. God does as he will.'

We all walked away slowly, back to our huts. There was something in this talk which made us feel small, but, at the same time, more comfortable in ourselves. We had the feeling that we could safely leave it to our creator to do what was best.

Tom said, 'That was good. I, for one, will be attending his services when that cross is put up.'

George and I agreed. The cross was erected in a hollow, within the camp and we attended on our days off.
At the end of one of these very simple and short services Tom said, 'If, and when we are released, I will say my prayers at that cross.'

'So will I,' I said.

We carried on with the daily slavery for a little over one month, when, around the middle of August 1945, we turned out for a work party, and the Japanese were absent. After about half an hour we started to wonder what was happening.

'This could be it', said Tom. 'Watch out for the buggers'.

I knew what he meant. We had spoken, more than once, on the subject of a Japanese capitulation.

'You never know how they will react,' Tom had said. 'They could mow us all down.'

I knew that these inscrutable little men could not be trusted. As time wore on, waiting for some movement, or word, we all became very uneasy. Our minds were eased, a little, when a Japanese N.C.O. arrived and shouted, 'No work, O. No work, O' and waved his hands across his chest. We understood this to mean that we could dismiss, which we quickly did. Still in fear as to what they would

do next, all 100 or so of us quickly disappeared to our huts. Not one man stayed outside.

We talked of possible freedom. There seemed no other explanation. But we remained very tense. Not one 'Hurray', but quiet talk, amongst which were plans of action, amongst friends, as to ways of keeping alive if they turned nasty. About an hour later, the padre came slowly round the huts to tell us that he had been called over by the Japanese officer, who told him that, 'If we stayed quietly in the camp, we could soon hear good news, which we had all been waiting for.' At this, excited talking buzzed throughout the camp. Our stomachs cramped with emotion, which we felt we should not show too much. The fear was still with us, as to how our captors would react. They still had two armed guards at the gates. So we overcame our excitement by walking up and down inside and outside our huts, talking of freedom in quiet voices.

The following morning we woke to the knowledge that we were on the verge of freedom. We were, however, still in the camp and still had a feeling of apprehension. In the late morning word went round that a British Sergeant had arrived in the camp. He was going round the huts, talking to the occupants. A short time later he came into our hut and sat on the edge of the bamboo platform. The first thing I noticed was his appearance. He seemed stout and stocky and had a healthy look, which we had not seen for more than three years. He was dressed in a green jungle uniform, which we had not seen before. We quickly gathered round and welcomed him. He said that he was a guard's sergeant and had been dropped into the jungle, near our camp, over a week ago to await the Japanese surrender. Many other troops had been parachuted into areas, near P.O.W camps, throughout Thailand. Their task was to locate and arrange the safe release of all prisoners of war.

He commented on our poor condition, and said he was sure that these little yellow bleeders would be dealt with. He had seen armed guards at the gate, and had arranged for them to be disarmed, immediately. Arrangements would be made within a few days for us to be transported to camps near Bangkok airfield, to await planes to fly us out. He then went on to fill us in with the up-to-date news, about the atom-bombing of Japan, which had forced them to surrender. He also had news of home, where he said, things were not the same. He talked of food shortages and general hardships caused by the war, and asked us not to expect things to be as they were. He wished us luck and a good journey home, and said that if we could find paper and pencils, we could write home, and he would see that they would be sent. He then left our hut and we busied ourselves

finding paper and pencils, of which there were very few in the camp. Tom, as usual, came up with the answer, by producing a short pencil from his pack and we managed to find a sheet of paper, which would do. We spent about half an hour writing and the hut went strangely quiet, whilst we all got down to the most important letters of our lives.

As promised, he returned when he had finished his talks in the other huts and collected our letters. No envelope, just bits of paper, which were folded with the name and address, for delivery, on the outside. We didn't think that they would get through, but my wife still has my letter, amongst her souvenirs. He left the camp about three hours after his arrival and we did not see him again.

The next day some clothing arrived at the camp. Shorts, shirts, socks, pants and vests. Trouble was, that this only worked out at one item per man. We drew lots. I got a shirt, Tom had a pair of pants and George, the lucky one, had a pair of shorts. We were very pleased to have something which smelt new, that we knew was hygienic. This caused quite a laugh around the camp as we strutted around wearing our new things. Some had a shirt, with a loin cloth just visible below. A worn out Bush hat on top, and a battered pair of boots, or homemade sandals. Others, a pair of pants, or a vest, or a pair of socks. The ones with the shorts didn't seem so ridiculous. Each had the battered hat, the loin cloth, and the worn out footwear to complement their one-and-only new item of clothing.

That evening, the Padre came round again to inform us that we were moving the following day. We were to be transported, by rail, to a camp in a village, just a few miles from Bangkok.

Journey to Freedom

The following morning after our usual tin full of rice and mug of tea, we filled our water bottles and waited, in an excited and rather impatient mood. We had very little to pack, our possessions were very few. I had sorted out my battered and worn shorts, which I had been keeping for this journey into freedom. With my new shirt I thought myself to be quite presentable. I was no longer a coolie, but an upright British Soldier, though just a bag of bones, weighing somewhere around seven stones. Tom also found a pair of shorts, which he had made from a kit-bag in Chung-Kai, and managed to get a well-worn shirt to go with it. He was also only a shadow of his former self, and weighed about the same as me. We had walked over to the cross, in the

hollow, on the evening of the guard sergeant's visit and, although we felt rather conspicuous, in this open area, had knelt to say our thanks for our delivery from this hell and for the strength given to us to be able to survive. We also prayed for those at home and for a quick reunion.

At about 10am we were called out, on parade, and were led off in single file, down the track through the jungle to the railway line, where we were again loaded into open goods wagons. We had two Japanese guards, or rather 'guides' with us, who travelled alone in the truck next to the engine, which this time was already attached to the trucks. We were soon on the move, on this uncomfortable and bumpy ride. This time, however, we were able to submerge the pains in our stomachs, with the thought that this should be the last one. We stopped, overnight, at the same village where we had stopped on the way up. Our Japanese guards/guides disappeared and a lot of us wandered round the village. Nothing to be seen, just a few rows of bamboo and leaf huts, the baked mud alleyways were deserted.

A young lad came up to us, however, and made signs for a drink. We followed him to one of the larger huts, where a Thai met us at the door and took us to a table, on which were displayed a number of dusty looking bottles. He poured from one bottle into earthenware mugs and indicated that it was good. We quietly decided not to try this, knowing that it could have disastrous effects on our stomachs and after indicating our thanks, left the hut. I think this was the ‘village pub’ and that, possibly, the Thai was trying to show his pleasure at the surrender of the Japs. We hurried back to the wagons, after agreeing that this was not the time to take risks. We still had the feeling that there was safety in numbers. The following morning we continued our journey, until in the late afternoon, we reached the village and the camp, from which we were to be flown to Rangoon.

The Last Camp

This camp was of the usual bamboo and leaf construction, with bamboo ledges to lie on. There was much excitement, with old friends, and comrades greeting each other and congratulating one another upon making it to survival. As each new group arrived in the camp we gathered outside the huts to look for friends and comrades. Quite an air of pandemonium, as we shouted out the names of those we knew. Shaking hands

and excited conversation, until we started to ask news of those who had not made it.

It was here that we heard of Ted; our friend at Chung-Kai, and heard that he had died of Black Water Fever, whilst working in a swampy area of southern Thailand. We also, to my great regret, heard of John, my friend on the boat coming over from England. He was with me in India, when we surrendered to the Japanese and during the first two months of our captivity. I had thought he would make it, as he seemed so fit compared with us when I met him at Wam-Po Camp, during 1943. He had died of Malaria, at a camp near the Three Pagoda Pass, on the border of Burma, when the railway was almost finished. We also had bad news of many other comrades, who because of malnutrition coupled with tropical diseases, had died in various camps along the railway line. The average age of those who died was about 25 to 30. What a waste of young lives, when, if the Japs had provided some nutritious food, a supply of quinine and a good quantity of lime and coverings for our latrines, most could have been saved.

On our second day in this camp the Australians heard that Yasimoto, 'The Kin-Sao Gorilla', had been seen in the local village and a group, who had worked at Kin-Sao, left the camp. They returned an hour or so later with serious faces and assured their comrades that he was no longer alive. I heard later that his death had not been a pleasant one. I understood that other sadistic guards had been dealt with, but I didn't get confirmation of this.

On the third day our names were called out, to be taken to the airfield on the following morning, to be flown out to Rangoon. The following morning the 'moving out' party gathered in the appointed place and we were picked up by army trucks for a short ride to the airfield. Here we were taken to large hangers to await our air transport.
Whilst waiting in our hanger, which was fully open to the airfield on one side, George said, 'Look at them'.
They were a party of about 20 Gurkhas, the remains of a battalion of around 500 small Nepalese troops, who had fought with us in the Battle for Singapore and had been taken prisoners with us when we surrendered to the Japanese in February 1942. I called them small because they were short in height, but they were by no means small in courage and tenacity. After being captured by the Japanese, the British Indian troops, which included a Battalion of Sikhs, and the survivors of these 500 Gurkhas, were pressed by the Japs to transfer their allegiance and to join their army. The Sikhs agreed, and transferred to the

Japanese army, but the Gurkhas refused. The Japs applied pressure by reducing their starvation rations to a level which caused the deaths of many of them. They then restored them to the starvation level, and put them to work on the dirtiest and heaviest work at the docks in Singapore, later moving them to work on the Burma-Siam Railway. The result of all this was to decimate them to the few we were watching, marching across the airfield. These few survivors, mere skeletons, tried to march upright and upon passing a British Officer, at the shouted order of their Jamadar (or N.C.O) did a smart eyes right salute. It seems crazy, in these days, for anyone to take loyalty so seriously, as to cause their own deaths. We gave them a cheer, as did others waiting in the hangers, and all agreed that every one of them should be awarded medals.

Flight to Rangoon

Our turn came in the afternoon, when we were led out to a waiting Dakota aircraft. Within minutes we were settled on steel ledges on either side of this twin-engine plane, as directed by the navigator and gunner. The navigator left us chatting to the gunner. The engines began to roar and the whole plane shuddered and rattled its way across the runway until it was airborne. For the majority of us, this was our first flight. We held our breaths and clung, with all our might, to the ledges, until we started to level off at the appropriate height, when the engines eased off a little, and the rattling became only an occasional shudder. At this point the navigator re-emerged from the cockpit, and produced a box of chocolate bars.

The crew were Canadians and they got chatting to us, in their American drawl, about our P.O.W life. Ten minutes later the pilot also came out of the cockpit, at which someone asked who was flying the plane.

'Oh don't worry,' said the pilot, 'we've left it to George'.

It was not until a little later that we found out that 'George' was the automatic pilot, which had not been in existence before we were taken prisoners. Nevertheless, we were a little fidgety, until approaching the mountain range on the Burma-Thailand border, the pilot and navigator returned to the cockpit. Our apprehension returned when, flying over these high mountains, the plane started to buck up, down and sideways, to accompanying roars from the engines. The gunner calmed our nerves by telling us that this happened on most

flights over these mountains and was something to do with tropical down winds.

The navigator again came out of the cockpit, when we had negotiated this mountain range and the plane had levelled out.

He said, 'Oh well. We're over that. If we don't go down before, we should land at Rangoon in about half an hour'.

'See now, Henry,' talking to the gunner, 'we're about a thousand miles past our routine overall. About time this crate was looked over'.

Turning to us, he said, 'Don't worry, there is a large swamp before we land, and we can belly flop into that, if necessary'.

None of this did much for our nerves, but as I have said before, I had trained my mind to think of things as fate, and thus unavoidable. Nevertheless I certainly did not want a tragic end, just at the last minute. Fortunately, we landed safely on Rangoon Airfield and were quickly bussed to the Rangoon Military Hospital, where we were welcomed and given a high tea. For the first

Liberated POW's in Rangoon Hospital 1945

time in three and a half years we tasted bread. Also milk and sugar in our tea. I am sure that they gave us the best available; as rations were very tight. We were allocated beds in a ward and slept on mattresses, with clean sheets and a blanket.

The Hospital was a large rectangular building, with a flat roof and open balconies on all sides, onto which we could walk directly from the wards, as there were no windows necessary in this climate. It was very close and hot. A large number of us had attacks of heat rash overnight, as we were not used to being in a building. Mine was so severe that I scratched some skin off my arms, trying to relieve the itching, by rubbing my arms against the metal edges of the bed. The next day we were issued with new uniforms. Shorts, shirts, shoes and socks. It was good to get into clean clothes, we felt very clean and smart, but the boots took a lot of getting used to, as our feet had been uncovered for so long.

In the afternoon, we were asked to attend a welcome back gathering in a barrack square, just outside the building, at which we were told that Lord Mountbatten was going to talk to us. The Hospital was almost full of returning P.O.W.s and in consequence some 400-500, who had been returned, attended. We were provided with tea and cake and were welcomed back by officers and ladies. Some of whom, I think, were W.V.S (Women's Voluntary Services) who mingled with us and spoke of home and other subjects.

There was a stirring in the crowd, when a tea chest was placed in the middle of the square and Lord Mountbatten jumped up on to this to convey his message. We could not help but to comment that such an eminent person, so close to the Royal Family, should use such a podium as a tea chest, on which to speak. He was dressed in a well-worn tropical uniform, with an Officer's cap to cover his head from the fierce sun. He said how pleased he, and all the troops in Burma were to see us back from captivity. They had heard of the severe hardships we had to face at the hands of the Japanese and were not unmindful of the many who had died in their hands. He promised that those responsible would be severely dealt with. He was relieved that they had surrendered, especially as information had been obtained that orders had gone out to Japanese troops, to kill all prisoners-of-war immediately they had information that allied troops had invaded Thailand. To finalise, he told us that home-going troops in Burma had agreed to delay their departure to allow P.O.Ws to be allocated transport home, as soon as ships became available. Our aim, he said, is to return you to Britain without delay. He left to loud cheers and clapping. George, Tom and I agreed

that Lord Mountbatten was genuinely concerned for us and that he was a real down to earth man, whom one could admire for his ability to know, and do something for those who needed it.

We spent the next day by being thoroughly medically examined, during the morning, and being allowed out to see Rangoon during the afternoon and evening. Rangoon was recovering from the ravages of war. It was not, however, badly damaged as the fighting had gone on more round the town than in it. It was very crowded with Burmese, mostly talking excitedly and this, with the shouting of the many street sellers, caused quite a commotion. The occasional rickshaws were back on the roads. Apart from military vehicles there was very little other transport. The main attraction was the Shwedagon Pagoda, and we made our way towards this. We could not help but find it, as it stood out, above the skyline all round the town. We approached it along a wide avenue of trees and were somewhat speechless at its magnificence. Made of carved stone it rose in steps to a golden dome, larger than St Paul's Cathedral. The whole building was decorated with gold, silver and yellow ornamentations, each depicting stages in the life of Buddha, of whom there were many statues and busts. The entrance was reached by a flight of stone steps, where, by tradition, everyone took off their footwear, to enter in bare feet. We removed our boots and carried them as we entered. The inside was almost as magnificent as the outside, with golden statues of Buddha of various sizes, surrounded by lovely ornamentations and the ever present Joss sticks and incense giving off smoky scents, whilst one, or more, Buddhist Monks dressed in their saffron gowns, sat, cross legged, on the stone floor, chanting prayers to groups of Burmese, kneeling around the Buddha. In the centre of the Pagoda was an enormous Buddha, with ornamentations of all colours surrounding him. Here the more senior Priests sat, chanting to the beat of drums, leading a large congregation of kneeling natives. As we left, we talked of this Pagoda. We had heard that it was the largest of all the Pagodas and we marvelled at how, in such an apparently backward country, such a building could have been planned and built, with so much detail and ornamentation.

The following morning we were told that those who were fit enough to travel were being sent to a transit camp and that afternoon we assembled, as our names were called. Fortunately, all three of us were called. We joined the others, on the parade ground outside and were picked up, by army lorries, to be taken a few miles to a tented camp to await our boat home. In this camp we were back to nature, lying on a ground sheet on the ground. We were quite used to this and we'd have the advantage of two blankets and good food. We stayed here

two days, before being conveyed to the docks, to be loaded on to a troopship named 'The Worcestershire'. Quite a coincidence, I thought, as I had been taken off the beaches at Bray Dunes, near Dunkirk in 1940 by the Destroyer, 'Worcester'. This ship was smaller than the American troopship we had travelled out on, which was named U.S. Wakefield and had been one of the largest pre-war liners, fitted with vanes, which reduced the rolling, even in very bad weather. The troopship 'Worcester' was built during the war, on a mass production basis and had little, or no, refinements. It was what we termed 'a bucket', as it rolled on the slightest swell. We were, however, very pleased to be on our way home, and the discomfort meant nothing to us.

So, we settled into our bunks on 'D' deck, three decks below water, where we ate, slept and chatted the days away. On the third day, in the evening, land was sighted. It was Ceylon, (known now as Sri Lanka). In the evening light, hugging the coastline, we saw a number of search lights, waving in the darkening sky. Some came down to sea level and two started to signal in the Morse code. Tom and I could read this and soon got the message 'Welcome Back'. We, simultaneously, shouted this out to those around us and a roar of approval went out from our ship. It was good to know that we were in friendly hands. We still had doubts about this being just a dream. The following morning we sailed into Colombo, the Capital. Here we were allowed six hours shore leave and descended on to the dock, to find a large group of W.R.N.S (Women's Royal Naval Service) girls. They broke off in pairs, as we walked towards them and

took over small groups of us, to walk us round the town. Tom, George and I were taken over by two very smart young ladies, dressed in white tropical uniforms. We felt very dowdy against these pretty, brown, sun-burned ladies, and tried to make up for their kindness by acting in a gentlemanly fashion. They took us round to the larger buildings, which were mainly colonial in style, with pillars at the entrances. Many of them were headquarters for the tea companies.

We then went round the bazars, where there were many roadside stalls, selling small gifts, made of leather and bone. We didn't buy much, as we had very little money and thought we may need it for the rest of our journey. We talked of home and families quite a lot, and were told that our loved ones had not had it easy. Rationing, queueing and overcrowding on public transport and the 'Doodle Bugs' which had attacked London and the South, at the latter end of the European war. They left us at the dock gates, and we thanked them for their charming company. We all agreed that whether being railroaded into acting as guides, or not, they had made a very good job of it. We also said that we were all a bit uneasy in the company of females, perhaps because we had not seen any for nearly four years.

The ship left port that evening, on its way across the Indian Ocean to the Suez Canal. Three days later, after some buffeting from squalls, and consequent seasickness, we entered calmer waters in the Red Sea. Red, is the right name for it. The sun shone down on us from morning to night, and the saying that in this sea you can fry an egg on the rails of a ship, could well be true. We found that the heat of the rails on deck in the middle of the day was unbearable to the hands. There was hardly any breeze, even from our movement. We sweated at every movement, and were not sorry when we were told that we would arrive at a port, known as Tufix, the following morning. Sure enough, in the cooler morning air, we went up on deck to find land, or rather desert, on either side of the ship. We had arrived at the Suez Canal and the port of Tufix, which was just a dockside with piles of army equipment and a few large huts, in which to store weapons.

Again we were allowed shore leave and were told that a train would take us to a Navy, Army and Airforce Institute (NAAFI) at which we could buy gifts. We were led from the docks, to a train with carriages, with openings for windows and wooden seats. A steam locomotive soon got us on our way, with desert dust flying into our faces. The only thing of interest we saw was a train of camels, carrying loads across this inhospitable land. Fortunately it was a short journey

and we were able to get a drink at the NAAFI. The gift stalls were few and sold only leather goods, which did not seem all that well made. With the heat, from the surrounding desert, and the limited attraction of the NAAFI bazaar, we decided to return to the ship and caught the next train back, to sweat the rest of the day away, with drinks on board readily available. I believe that Eilat is somewhere on the opposite shore from Tufix. If so, I cannot understand how it has become a holiday resort, as this area seems a most uncomfortable place and certainly too hot for the average European.

The next morning we awoke to find that our ship was negotiating its way through the Suez Canal, with the banks some 200 yds on either side of us. It seemed as though the ship was being wheeled overland. The land was mostly desert, with occasional palms and dried up scrub bushes. Occasionally we would pass Egyptian people, either riding or walking, with camels or donkeys, and during the afternoon, when we were approaching the Mediterranean end of the canal, a road, at the one side, became much more populated with people walking and on donkey carts. The vegetation also improved to the point where the banks seemed almost green.

We stopped at Suez and dropped anchor for about an hour. After which we moved off again to enter the Mediterranean Sea. At this point we were moving very slowly and as I believe is customary the 'Bum Boats', as they were known, came alongside. Rather like the pirates of old, they threw lines over the ships rails and hoisted their wares by attaching samples to the one end and hauling them up to us. They then indicated the price, in pounds, by using their fingers. The goods, handbags, purses, souvenirs, etc. seemed quite cheap and many men put money in the buckets, provided by the same rope. Many, however, lost their money and goods when our ship took on speed and the occupants of the 'Bum Boats' cut the rope and pulled away. The quicker each ship pulled away, after leaving Suez, the more profit for the Bum Boat traders.

We soon lost sight of land, as we started on the last lap of our journey home, and did not see it again until we reached Gibraltar the following day. We did not stop, but carried on into the Atlantic Ocean, where we met rougher seas and the ship dipped and rolled. The weather also became much colder and we were pleased to be in UK uniform, which we had been told to change into soon after leaving Suez. We passed the Bay of Biscay the following morning and although the ship continued to pitch about a lot, we avoided the heavy seas, which are common to this bay.

The next morning we saw land, in the distance, on our starboard (right) and great excitement developed amongst us, when we heard that it was England. The shore gradually got nearer to us and during the afternoon our speed reduced as we started to proceed into a large inlet, which we soon heard was the Mersey. Shortly after we docked at Liverpool. The port from which we had sailed almost four years to the day, ago. We waited for about an hour, whilst the handicapped, mainly amputees from jungle ulcers, were taken off and then gradually wended our way down the gangplank to the dock, where we were loaded into buses and taken to a Nissen Hut camp, some three miles away. Here we were given a dinner of stewed beef, which was very welcome in this cold, misty climate, where we found it necessary to wear our overcoats each time we went outside the huts. The following day, with a great deal of excitement, we were ‘documented’ which meant that we had to attend, in alphabetical order, at various huts in the camp, to report in, to obtain our leave passes, our rail warrants and our ration tokens for home. Finally we had to report, in the late afternoon, to a hut where our medal ribbons were sewn on to our tunics, by ladies. 'What did you do in the war?' enquiries, soon elicited the information, as to which ribbons they should attach. Though few of us bothered, we did not want to be delayed for that home-going train on the following morning.

After breakfast, which we could hardly eat for excited chattering, the next day, we waited for our names to be called and said our goodbyes to our friends.

Tom said, 'See you again, look after yourself. Be in contact,' as we shook hands.

I said, 'Didn't think we'd ever make it. I'll contact you soon'.

My bus took us to the station, where a train was waiting, reserved for us, and we were on our way, dropping off men at each main station, until we reached Snow Hill, Birmingham. My emotional excitement, as we got nearer and nearer to home, did nothing for my health. My stomach started to worry me and I felt faint at the thought that all this would make me ill at our meeting. I took a grip on myself by leaning back and attempting to blank out my mind. This seemed to work for, as we started to run into the platform, I had recovered sufficiently to stand and look out for anyone I knew, and particularly for the one I loved.

We stopped and I gathered my kit and waited in the corridor until I reached the door and was able to get out. There were, at least, 100 people waiting to greet us and all I could see were the heads of the crowd. I slowly wended my way down the platform. It was not until I was within two yards of her that our eyes

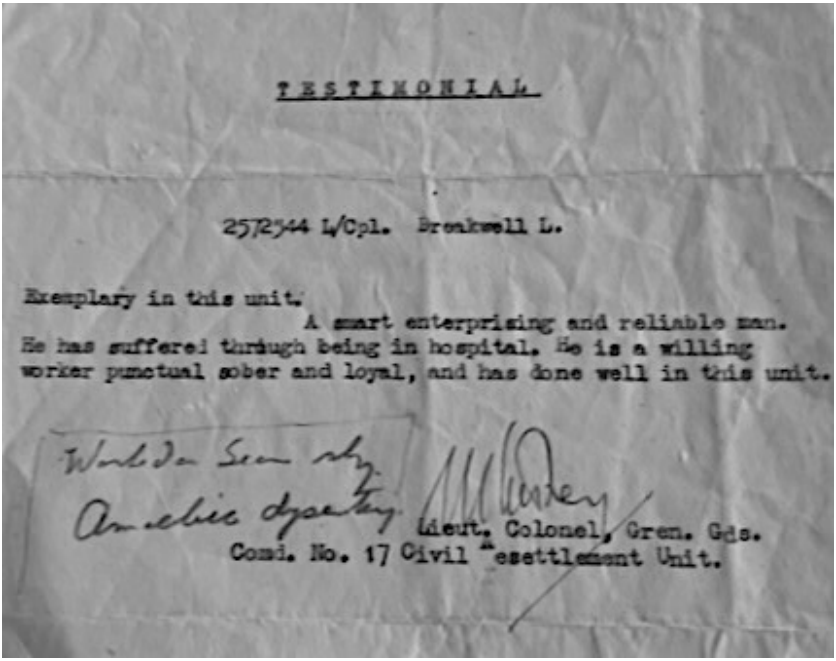
met. We both smiled, and within a few seconds were in each other's arms. Was it a dream? Was it real? My wife. The one I prayed for every night, in the leaved huts in the jungle. We had been apart, for as long as we had been together, since our marriage, and now we were together again. She was just as beautiful as I had remembered her. She led me across the platform to my eldest brother, Bill and his wife, Flo. My sister, Cressy, was also there, and after greeting one another she led us out of the station to a taxi, which had been waiting for almost an hour, and we were soon on our way home.

Homecoming - Autumn 1945

I have already mentioned the close relationship which existed between the members of large families. Mine was no exception. Apart from Stan and Charlie, who were serving abroad in the armed forces, all my family were at Mother's house, to welcome me home. My four-year-old son, John, was the first to greet me at the door. He wanted to see the father he had heard so much about, but had never met. Though he did not know me, he had been told so much about me, that we immediately got on well together. At the ensuing get-together I walked around looking at familiar objects. Trying to convince myself that this was not just a dream and I was not still a prisoner-of-war, living on boiled rice in the Siamese jungle. Floss took me in hand, and in her quiet manner soon relieved me of this fear.

For a few years I was in and out of hospital, where Floss obtained information on a suitable diet for my tropically-diseased body. Within a few years I was back to reasonable health. She had won the fight. I was luckily not like so many ex-prisoners-of-war of the Japanese who died, including my best friend, Tom.

On reflection, I now think that my hardships of those three years in Japanese hands have produced some plusses. Firstly, having experienced the very lowest form of existence, I have been able to face the ups and downs of life with greater fortitude. Secondly, I think I gained a better understanding of people in general. Thirdly, the diseases from which I suffered have forced me on to a reduced fat diet for nearly fifty years, which I believe has, in my case, enabled me to remain fairly fit for 50 years since my captivity. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the ability to relax and face difficulties, as fate and the will of God, first learned in the prison camps, has helped me greatly over the years.



TESTIMONIAL

2572344 L/Cpl. Brookwell L.

Exemplary in this unit.
A smart enterprising and reliable man.
He has suffered through being in hospital. He is a willing worker punctual sober and loyal, and has done well in this unit.

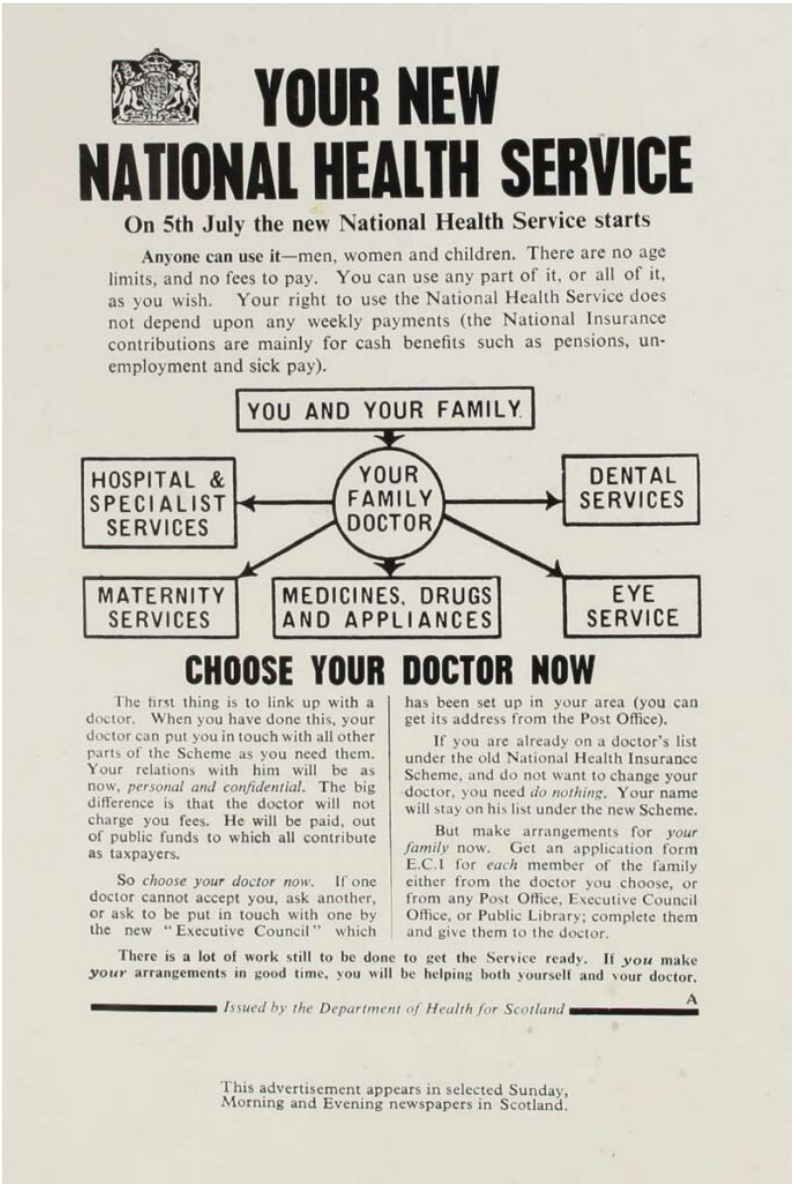
Lieut. Colonel, Gren. Gds.
Comd. No. 17 Civil Resettlement Unit.

Personally, I will never forgive the Japanese nation for their inhumanity to unarmed, defenceless, human beings, particularly those who died, unnecessarily, in their hands. You see, I cannot remember all the names of those I saw, but I clearly remember them. My friends and comrades, lying with no covering except a piece of rag round their loins. Their emaciated, thin bodies lying on a bamboo ledge. Still sufficiently conscious to acknowledge me, but with yellowing skin and glazed eyes, looking up to say, 'I have given it up'. Going back to my hut to inform those who knew them that, 'So and so has had it. Finished, given it up'. No need to look at the notice board, we knew that his name would be on it, the next day. Of the British, Australian and Dutch P.O.Ws 18,000 died in this manner, most of whom were British.

However, as my wife says, 'We must not carry this hatred down to our children and grandchildren who have to live in a changed world, in which the Japanese are the commercial giants'. I say, fair enough but watch them with care, as I still see that single-mindedness, born of the Bushido Cult, which could be to master that which they did not take by arms, by commercialism.

Immediately After the War

There was general rejoicing amongst the population. No more air raids to contend with, and the hope that food would now become available without the use of ration books. The fear of the postman conveying the



YOUR NEW NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

On 5th July the new National Health Service starts

Anyone can use it—men, women and children. There are no age limits, and no fees to pay. You can use any part of it, or all of it, as you wish. Your right to use the National Health Service does not depend upon any weekly payments (the National Insurance contributions are mainly for cash benefits such as pensions, unemployment and sick pay).

CHOOSE YOUR DOCTOR NOW

The first thing is to link up with a doctor. When you have done this, your doctor can put you in touch with all other parts of the Scheme as you need them. Your relations with him will be as now, *personal and confidential*. The big difference is that the doctor will not charge you fees. He will be paid, out of public funds to which all contribute as taxpayers.

So *choose your doctor now*. If one doctor cannot accept you, ask another, or ask to be put in touch with one by the new "Executive Council" which has been set up in your area (you can get its address from the Post Office).

If you are already on a doctor's list under the old National Health Insurance Scheme, and do not want to change your doctor, you need *do nothing*. Your name will stay on his list under the new Scheme.

But make arrangements for *your family* now. Get an application form E.C.1 for *each* member of the family either from the doctor you choose, or from any Post Office, Executive Council Office, or Public Library; complete them and give them to the doctor.

There is a lot of work still to be done to get the Service ready. If *you* make *your* arrangements in good time, you will be helping both yourself and your doctor.

A

Issued by the Department of Health for Scotland

This advertisement appears in selected Sunday, Morning and Evening newspapers in Scotland.

news of death, or injury of a loved one, was gone. The motto of 'Everything comes to those who wait,' applied. The people had gone through six years of hardship, and could now live a normal life. Returning servicemen had some difficulties in adjusting. For the last five or six years they had been used to receiving orders and rarely had to make decisions. Now that they were back with their families, their role had been changed to one of responsibility for themselves and their families, which involved decision-making. The majority took this in their stride, and were soon back to civilian employment, happy to be able to provide for their loved-ones.

Change of Government 1945-50

Shortly after my return home, I heard from a friend that British troops serving in the North African desert had been in the habit of forming discussion groups during the evenings, when they were not involved in battles with Rommel's German army. The main subject being, as usual, their intentions on returning home. It was generally agreed that when that happy time arrived, those who survived the fighting would no longer tip their hats to the bosses. It was thought that employers needed them just as much as they needed their jobs, and that they would do their best to look after the working man. Which was considered to be almost a communistic attitude at the time. This way of thinking was underlined, when at the general election in 1945, held immediately after Victory Europe day, our very popular war-time leader, Winston Churchill, was replaced by Clement Atlee, and a Labour government.

The National Health Service - 1948

The new government created a free health service, introduced by Mr Nye Bevan, the Minister of Health, which was highly acclaimed by the public. Prior to this they were responsible for the cost of their own medical needs. Hospitals had been funded in the main by voluntary subscriptions, such as the 'Saturday Hospital Fund', whereby employees agreed to have a small deduction taken from their wages, which covered them and their families for hospital treatment. Fees for attendance at doctor's surgeries were paid by the patient. I remember an occasion when I had to visit a doctor, taking with me his fee, which with the additional cost of the medicine, made a big hole in my weekly wages. With the introduction of the National Health Service, such

fees ceased, the government paid for all medical needs. Hospitals were now able to expand and improve their services, to the point where the government had difficulty in providing sufficient funds. General Practice surgeries, which had been attended by only a few, were now overcrowded, with many minor complaints, which were formerly dealt with at home with the aid of the local chemist. With our exploding population, I do think that perhaps some expenses, based on the ability to pay, should be charged to the patient. At the same time, I would not advocate the closure of such a valuable, and needed, National Health Service.

The Welfare State and Housing

The Social Security Act, ensuring that everyone had sufficient money to live on, was also introduced by the Attlee Government. Again a very worthwhile cause, which unfortunately is sometimes open to abuse, from those not in need, and the habitually unemployed, who prefer to stay at home. This leaves the employed to pay the cost, the burden of which increases yearly, and which no government has yet been able to resolve.
The Attlee Government also encouraged a large council house building programme and brought in a set of new standards (Parker Morris 1946) to ensure that they were fit for returning soldiers and their families. Several of my own family members, including myself, were to benefit from this.

Living with Relatives 1945-47

At this stage it is necessary for me to go back to the early post war days, when my mother was very relieved to have her family back without serious harm. This could not be said for a number of her friends and neighbours. Amongst the returning servicemen was my sister Cressy's husband Charlie, who had been involved in fighting in the Middle East. Although his return was a happy event, it caused a problem for Floss and myself. Floss and our son, John (now 4 years of age) had lived with Cressy throughout the war and regardless of Charlie telling us not to worry about housing, we realised that to avoid overcrowding in their semi-detached home, we must now find a house for ourselves.
This was not as easy as we thought. Very few houses had been built during the war, and this, together with a large demand from ex-servicemen who, like

myself, had left their families living with relatives or whose houses had been bombed, caused a large increase in the price of property. Floss had added to our savings while I was in the army, but not enough to cover for this increase. In consequence we were advised to put our case to the Housing Department, where I was lucky enough to have had my name on the Emergency Housing List.

Our Own Home - 1947

Within two years of me returning from captivity, we were delighted to be offered a house. This was situated on the outskirts of Solihull, which was then a Rural District Council, and as the name implies, was within easy walking distance of open countryside. Being a two bedroomed council house, the rent was within our means, and we had no difficulty in deciding that this was quite suitable for our needs. Together with John, then six years old, we were quite happy to have a new home with up-to-date facilities.

Money however, was in short supply. I had returned to my pre-war occupation as an assistant in the grocery trade based in Birmingham town centre, a distance of seven miles away. My wages were low as with many other ex-servicemen, I returned to the position in the company that I held at the start of the war. With this low income, plus the cost of private company bus fares, (Birmingham Corporation buses stopped at the boundary with Solihull, near where we had previously lived), there was little to spare for household needs. Fortunately we had a large back garden, in which I managed to grow sufficient potatoes and greens to last us for six months of the year, which helped a little. We lived mainly in the small back room of the house which had an enclosed coke-burning fire. In those days the fuel supply for cooking was town gas, made locally. The by-product of this was ‘coke’, which you could buy relatively cheaply, in bags. This was provided you could transport it yourself, which for most locals was by means of carrying it in heavy sacks on their bicycles.

Improved Circumstances -1949

This was a very good year for us. The gods must have been smiling when our family was completed with the birth of our second son, Robert. To add to this I was fortunate enough to find more suitable work with our local council in Solihull. I applied for this clerical position in the Public

Health Department, with little hope of being successful and was therefore surprised to receive a reply inviting me to an interview, resulting in a good position.

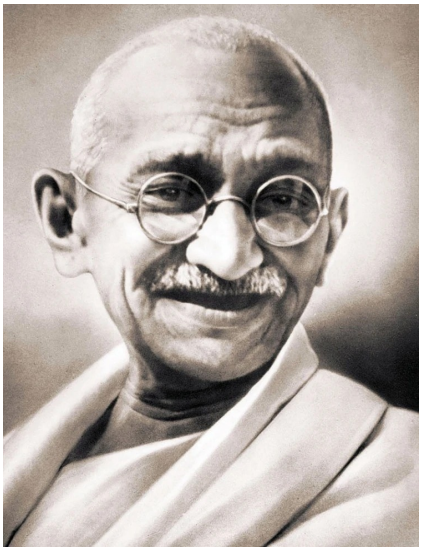
On holiday in Llandudno 1947, with John

A New Church -1949

Before the second world war, Elmdon Heath, where we now lived, was a small village within the Solihull District Council, with a few older properties, a large pub and a set of essential retail shops. There was however no church as the population was too small to justify one. Now, with the addition of all the new council houses, it was decided to build a new church on land close to where we lived. This new church provided a focal point for the area and I got involved by helping to run the 'Boys Brigade' for some time.

The Breakdown of the Colonies

Britain entered the Second World War with many colonies, most of which had come under British dominance during the reign of Queen Victoria. India, parts of Africa, the West Indies, Singapore, Burma, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, and Malta. Collectively, this was known as the British Empire, which also included the colonies of South Africa, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. The high expenditure of maintaining British forces, in all these lands, was noticed after the first world war. After the second world war this was found to be too great a burden for the British government. The first colony to be granted independence was India, in 1947. The greatly respected Mahatma Gandhi had



Mahatma Gandhi

been promised this freedom during World War II, in exchange for India's help against the Japanese, who at that time had reached their Burma frontier. Immediately after the war, the Attlee government put this into effect. I remember that Lord Mountbatten handed the reigns of government over to the Mahatma, at a ceremony in Government House, New Delhi, during 1947.

The remaining Colonies, except Gibraltar and Hong Kong, were given their independence a short time later. Gibraltar, being the gateway to the

Mediterranean was exempted because it was of strategic importance, as was Hong Kong – the financial centre of the Far East. The latter was held under an agreement with China, which expired during 1997, when it was handed back to their government. The colonies of South Africa, Canada, New Zealand and Australia were also given independence, but retained their allegiance to the British Crown at the time. Following in the steps of Alexander the Great and the Romans, we had lost our Empire. Regardless of the fact that we did exploit the lands under our control, we left our mark, with British-constructed railways, anti-malarial drainage, buildings and roads etc. I like to think that we also improved the sanitation and health of the native population of these lands.

A Peaceful Invasion - 1950

After the end of empire, there was an influx of people from different cultures, which had both a positive and negative effect. In order to find housing, which, as I have said before was in short supply after the war, groups of immigrants would get together and buy or rent large older properties near the centre of cities, such as Birmingham. These properties would then become overcrowded with people of a different culture and ways of living to their white English neighbours, who often would move out leaving whole neighbourhoods of predominantly immigrant families. This did cause some friction which is still apparent in our current society today.

The different culture of these immigrants brought with it some positive effects also, particularly in music and food. Probably the most noticeable of these to me were in the numerous curry houses which sprang up in Birmingham around the Sparkhill area, in what is now referred to as the Curry Triangle. Curry is one of the foods that I definitely cannot eat due to the strict diet I have been on since my prisoner-of-war days, coupled with the fact that after 4 years on a mainly rice diet I absolutely hate it. However to a lot of English people at the time, who in the 1950's began to have more spare money in their pockets, the Curry Houses offered a cheap but exotic night out and a complete change from the Lyons Corner Houses of the 1930's.

A Royal Loss and a New Queen

The nation went into sincere mourning when we all heard that our much revered monarch, King George VI, had died. His health had not been too good throughout his reign. I have already mentioned his stoicism in agreeing to take the crown, when his elder brother, Edward VIII, abdicated his royal duty to marry Mrs Simpson in 1938. I am sure that the future King George would very much have preferred to continue his quiet country life, than to be thrust into his royal role. To him this was a herculean task, his poor health included an inclination to stutter, which was noticeable during his Christmas speeches. He no doubt had to practice many of these before giving them, and was assisted by his wife, our present well-loved Queen Mother, who was at his side whenever possible. He reigned throughout World War II, during which both he and the Queen had a large number of functions to attend, some of which were entirely voluntary. I heard of an occasion when they broke with Royal protocol, to mingle with the bombed-out people of London, with whom they had great sympathy. This was not an official duty, but purely voluntary, involving them in finding their way through the rubble of blown-down houses and buildings. Unlike many of his predecessors, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth did everything within their power for Britain and their people. Their greatest gift to the nation was their daughter, who became Queen Elizabeth II, and gave us more than seventy years of untroubled rule.

Following in her father's footsteps, she has done everything possible to uphold the monarchy and advance the status of Britain and its people. Her visits abroad are a great asset to our standing in the world, particularly in English-speaking countries, where she is considered to be closely allied with their past. I am sure

that the few who advocate the disbandment of royalty want their heads examined. Do they not know that without the royal family we would be just another country? Take it from me, an octogenarian. I have lived long enough to know a good thing when I have one. I came into the world shortly after the death of King Edward VII, and have lived through the reigns of King George V and King George VI. Our present Queen Elizabeth II has outshone her predecessors in dealing with problems. No doubt with the aid of Prince Philip, who I think, would mix his advice with a certain amount of humour. Yes, we could not have a better monarch, and I, for one, will raise my glass to her, with all sincerity, when she reaches her golden jubilee in 2002.

Entertainment 1950-1960

My father's pre-war forecast of television came into being in the 1950's. Arriving home from work one evening in 1938, he walked over to our rather cumbersome wireless set and pointing at the cover over the loudspeaker said, 'you will see a picture here soon'.

Thinking that he was joking, we laughed, 'you wait and see' he said, 'they have found a way of broadcasting pictures'. We had accepted the fact that sound could be broadcast, but to hear that pictures could be transmitted too, seemed

almost impossible. At the beginning of the 1950's we heard that the BBC had been researching this phenomena and were ready to transmit this wonderful new home entertainment. Were it not for wartime delay, we would have been watching this sooner.

Although televisions were very expensive to start with, families saved up their spare money to buy one and by the time of Queen Elizabeth's Coronation, a proportion of the population had managed to do so. As the Coronation was a national event, those already with televisions invited neighbours without one, into their homes to watch it. Not long after the Coronation my wife generously decided to sell her Singer sewing machine, which had served her well during the war years, in order that we could find enough money to get a black and white (no colour in those days) television. Although television was only on for a few hours in the evening and at weekends, it had a profound effect on peoples lives. Housewives found more time to sit down in the evenings to watch their favourite programmes, men did not frequent the pubs so much and children came in from playing to watch children's TV programmes. Local cinemas closed, leaving only the larger ones in town centres - those that spent money on redecorating, better seating and larger, wide screens to keep their audience. The film companies, who were mostly in America, produced longer blockbuster films with improved colour to compete with television.

During the 1950's, there was also a big change in the way music was played. Up to that time, the only access to music was via the BBC Light Programme, or from large 78rpm records which were played on old manual wind up record players, or on the piano which a lot of people still had. Electrically driven record players

with better amplification and needles began to appear. These could play the new 45 rpm single-song records and the even better 33rpm long-player records which could hold all the hit songs from a new musical. Our son John, whilst at school, worked in an electrical and music shop on Saturdays and remembers customers coming in to listen to records they were thinking of buying in small sound-proofed booths. We eventually managed to purchase a radiogram which would hold and play several records. Records were, however still relatively expensive and therefore valuable to the owner

Pianos became obsolete, and difficult to get rid of, if you had one. Fortunately we didn't. One way was to organise piano breaking competitions for charity. The thought of breaking up and scrapping a piano now would be considered sacrilege but it was common in the late 1950's, as they had lost their value.

Nationalised Industries

By 1958, the main industries nationalised after the war were the nation's backbone. Water, electricity, gas and telecommunications, together with trunk roads, and railways were all under government control, and trying hard to modernise. The population were beginning to get home phones, sometimes only on shared lines with their neighbour, but it was better than walking to the symbolic red public call box or posting a letter. The Electricity Board embraced the nuclear age and built large nuclear power stations, in out-of-the-way places, well away from the general population. The Gas Board was also investing in modern techniques and opened two research centres. One of these was in Solihull and within walking distance of where we lived. Our son John, at the time was due to leave school and applied for a job as a Research Assistant at the Solihull Gas Council Research station and duly started work there.

Trouble in the Workplace - 1960's

The name, 'Shop Steward', and 'Convenor' became important in factories during this time, where the unions had given them the power to discuss, with their employers, all matters affecting the workforce, which was good for both the employer and employee. Unfortunately, the workers, often encouraged by the shop stewards, began to demand terms which affected

the profitability of the business, and in some cases could have caused the closure of the company. I remember the time when the Austin motor car factory's production lines were stopped on a number of occasions by an over-zealous shop steward, known as 'Red Robo'. Strike action was used as a weapon to try and force management to agree to all kinds of conditions, which they could not afford without risking loss-making. Such action was used in many workplaces, until the workers began to realise that this was having a bad effect on their pay packets and the safety of their employment.

The Nuclear Threat 1960-62

Russia, with its large, well equipped army, had become a threat to the western countries, which included America. Not that there was any tangible reason for this, other than the adoption of communism by Russia. Most other countries followed a capitalist form of government. America was the largest capitalist country and this caused a certain amount of distrust between these two nations. America had used the atom bomb to end the war with Japan, and almost before the ink was dry on the surrender document, Russia had let it be known that they knew the secret of this deadly weapon. American scientists got to work and developed a much more powerful weapon, known as the hydrogen bomb, which instead of laying to waste an area of one mile from the explosion, was able to destroy everything within a hundred square miles, or more. Again, the Russians informed the world that they had also developed this weapon and with it a missile capable of delivering it throughout the world.

This dangerous game of tit-for-tat caused considerable concern amongst the populations of a number of nations, who realised the disastrous power of the hydrogen bomb. War with such a weapon was thought of as an end to civilisation, as we know it. It was rumoured that some of the wealthy amongst us had thought of constructing concrete, underground shelters, holding sufficient food and drink to last three months. After which it was thought that the ground outside may have recovered from the heat and contamination of such a bomb. The expense of constructing a suitable shelter was beyond the means of most people, and we had no alternative but to hope that it was not used. This sounds like an Orwellian dream, but I can assure you that it was true-to-life at that time.

Our government had no real safeguards against a nuclear bomb attack other than to hope and plan for some survival of the country. It built a series of nuclear bunkers, some large to allow for the government and armed forces nationally, and locally to survive in some format. They also built small observation posts at view points on the tops of hills, which were staffed by the Observation Corps.

The Space Age Arrives 1957-1969

Fortunately, America and Russia found a new game to play, when the Russians sent the first astronaut, Yuri Gagarin, into space, where he circled the earth before returning to base. Not to be outdone, American scientists produced a rocket to send John M Glenn on a trip round the

Yuri Gagarin

earth. The fear of nuclear war subsided, as the space scientists of these two nations began to confer on this interesting subject, the outcome of which was a landing on the moon by the Americans, Edwin Aldrin and Neil Armstrong in 1969. We on earth had the opportunity to see these men land on television, and to hear Neil Armstrong describing the powdery, rugged, rocky surface, with no sign of life. A bit of a let-down really, but we do now know that there is no 'man-in-the-moon'. I understand that we are still trying to discover an inhabited planet, beyond the moon. Who knows, we may find out more in the new millennium.

Leonard Breakwell - May 1980

Additional Information

by John Breakwell

Orton and the Ditton Priors Light Railway

Around 1908, when my father's father was a lad, a 12-mile light railway was conceived and built from Cleobury Mortimer to Ditton Priors. My father's grandfather, who owned a stone quarry at the Limes, Orton, which provided a lot of the stone for the bridges along the route. It is rumoured that he also used the stone masons working on the bridges to build his house at the Limes.
This light railway had a halt at Prescott siding, which was originally planned to

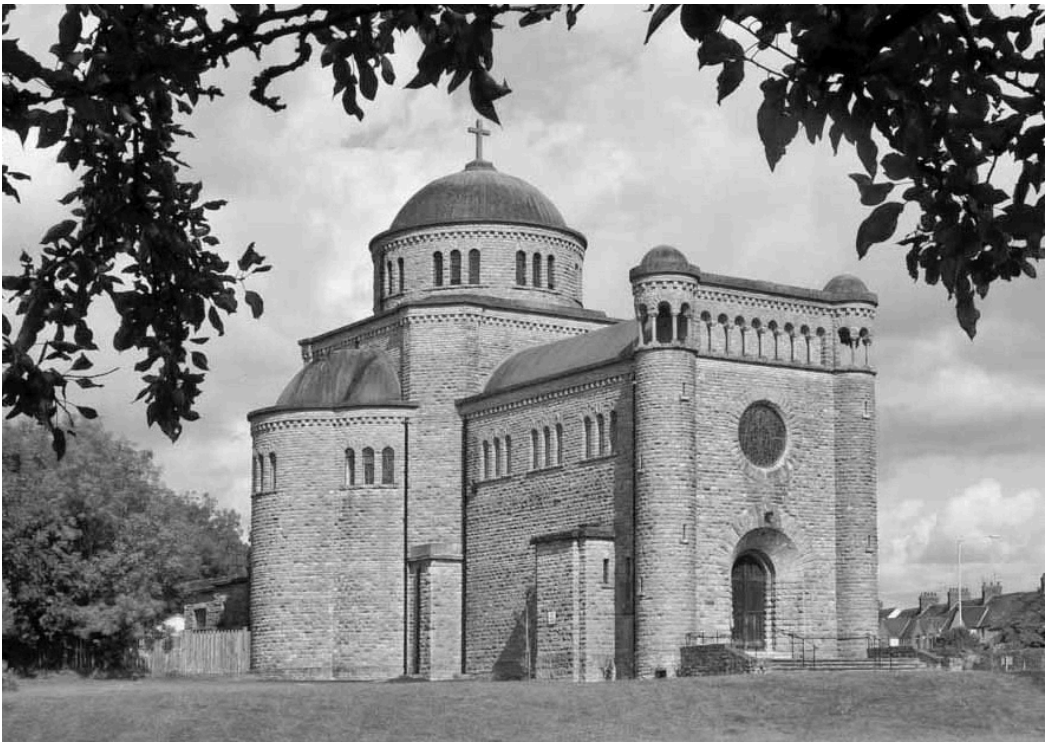
Cleobury Station

be called Orton. The closeness of the railway helped Len's grandfather expand the business. Len's father, Ernest Breakwell would have been expected to eventually go into the business, but did not always get on well with his father, being a bit too adventurous. He did work for his Dad at the quarry and later told tales of driving the large Steam Rollers down Orton bank, and seeing if he could get them up on two wheels as he turned into the Limes.

Ernest's Dad then bought the New Inn pub in Orton, and asked his son, who was now older, and married, to run it. This was not successful and eventually Ernest

moved to Birmingham to work as a lorry driver for the railway using his expertise of driving steam rollers to navigate the slippery cobbled streets.

My father, Len was born in Birmingham but spent many a happy holiday at Orton travelling by rail from Birmingham to Cleobury Mortimer, and thence on the light railway up to Orton. He, his brothers and friends used to camp out in the quarry, or in the field by the side of the New Inn. Stone from the quarry was still being sold in the 1950's. Notably, St Peters Church in Ludlow was built using this stone.



St Peter's, Ludlow

Leonard Breakwell's Life - Key Events

Len was born 5th December 1916 in Tyseley, Birmingham.

His parents were Thomas Ernest Breakwell and Hilda Mary Bright both of Orton in Shropshire.

Thomas and Hilda

Len had six siblings:

William Thomas Breakwell, born September 1909
Leslie Breakwell, born January 1911
Gladys Breakwell, born December 1912
Cressy May Breakwell, born December 1914
Stanley Breakwell, born December 1918
Roy Breakwell, born August 1920

Len joined the Royal Corps of Signals at the outbreak of the Second World War, Army No 2572544, serving at Dunkirk, from May-June 1940, for which he received a medal, and later a citation from the Mayor of Dunkirk. Len also received a medal for his service in the Far East.

Len married Florence (Floss) Lillian Foster on 14th October 1939 at St Lukes Church, Kingstanding, Birmingham.
Len and Floss' first child, Christopher John was born in September 1941, prior to Len's overseas posting to Singapore in January 1942.

Len was taken prisoner by the Japanese in 1942 and was not released until the end of the war. He suffered several illnesses during his captivity, including amoebic hepatitis and PTSD, which was not recognised in 1945, but he was eventually given a war pension.

Len and Floss moved into their first house, at 40, Redlands Close, Solihull in 1947. They managed to purchase it from Solihull Council in November 1976.

Len was employed by Solihull Council, mainly in the Public Health Department, from 1949 until his retirement.

Len and Floss' second son, Robert was born in 1949.

Len and Floss had four Grandchildren, David, Jeremy, Simon and Georgina. They also had three great-grandchildren - Hannah, Ben and Thomas.

Len and Floss celebrated their Diamond Wedding Anniversary in October 1999.

Len passed away at Solihull hospital after a short illness in 2002.

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Finally to all those who took the trouble to read and offer final editing suggestions.

I hope the outcome of everyone's labours has produced a book that will be of great interest to people. I truly believe that it is a genuine account of one extraordinary person's life in the 20th Century.

John Breakwell